

# EYES AND EARS

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*ISAIAH 11:1-10; MATTHEW 3:1-12*

*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*

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On this second Sunday of Advent, I want to talk about eyes and ears. I want to talk about the things that we see and the things we hear, about *why* we see and hear what we do, and, most importantly, about what God calls us to in light of this.

In several places throughout the gospels, Jesus asks those who fail to understand his teaching and his kingdom, “Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?”

This question hearkens back to prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel who sought to call a rebellious people back to God:

They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear (Ezekiel 12:2).

Our eyes and ears do not always see and hear what they ought to. Our senses do not always apprehend reality comprehensively or correctly.

There are two reasons for this. Sometimes we *can't* see and hear as accurately as we might wish. Sometimes we *won't*.

Last week I received a book in the mail by Mark Alan Powell called *What Do They Hear?* It's a book about you. And about me. It's about what pastors say when they preach and about what people hear and about the gap between the two.

Apparently, what I *say* and what you *hear* aren't always the same thing! Who knew.

Powell draws attention to two fascinating examples.

In the first, the author read the story of the prodigal son to a group of American students and a group of Russian students. After he read the story, he asked the two groups to identify the cause or causes of the son's crisis moment when he decides to return home to the father he has rejected.

100% of American students pointed to the son's squandering of his father's inheritance and his immoral living that landed him in his predicament. Only 6% mentioned the fact that there was a famine in the land where he found himself.

By contrast, only 34% of Russian students saw the son's lifestyle choices, while 84% mentioned the famine.

The American students focused primarily on the moral choices of the younger son while the Russian students drew attention to the external circumstances in which he found himself.

The same experiment was done with the story of Good Samaritan. After hearing the story, a group of Western and Tanzanian listeners were asked to identify which of the characters they most identified with.

Western readers instinctively identified with, priest, Levite, or the Samaritan. They saw themselves as the ones with the option to pass by or not, and the story as an exhortation to help those in need.

The Tanzanians instinctively responded, "the man in the ditch." They saw the story as a reminder that the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbour?" is best determined by the one who finds himself in *need* of a neighbour.

**The point of the stories is that our social location influences how we hear and what we hear.**

Yet we're often not even aware of how our seeing and our hearing are influenced, even *determined* by these kinds of factors. Factors like:

- When and where we were born

- The kinds of families we were raised in
- The religious communities that shaped us (or not)
- The experiences we have had in our lives (suffering, betrayal, comfort, privilege...)

We don't see or hear with comprehensive clarity or accuracy simply because we can only inhabit one social location. We can do our best to see things from the point of view of others, we can imaginatively enter the experience of others, but we can never do so fully.

Our eyes and ears can only see and hear so much because there are inherent limitations to being human.

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So, sometimes we don't see and hear what we ought to because we can't.

Other times it's because we won't. Or because we don't want to. We tend to see and to hear what we expect to see and hear, and often what flatters us.

We're going to take a bit of a psychology detour and talk about two terms. Bear with me 😊

The first is "confirmation bias."

This term simply points to the fact that we all tend to gravitate toward voices that confirm what we already think/believe/are convinced of.

We tend to screen out and select only those voices that nicely align with our own. We often can't be bothered to actually read opposing viewpoints or to engage in a conversation where our mind might actually be changed.

If you have any doubt about whether confirmation bias is a real thing, I invite you to spend half an hour on Facebook. 😊

By virtue of my position, I am frequently on the receiving end of "articles you should read." I get all kinds of reading material from all kinds of people from across a wide spectrum of theological and political beliefs. Almost always these articles are sent with

the expectation that they will justify or bolster the sender's opinion and get me to agree with them.

I very rarely receive reading material with a note like, "You know, I'm not sure I agree with this person's perspective entirely, but this book or article really made me think." Come to think of it, I rarely share stuff like this either...

Alongside confirmation bias, we have what psychologists call "fundamental attribution error."

Put in simple terms, this theory talks about the causes we assign to behaviour, that of others and our own.

For others, we tend to assume personal and dispositional causes. *Especially* when it's behaviour we don't happen to like.

- She doesn't have a job because she's lazy
- He bought that new car because he greedy and vain
- She said that thing to me because she's thoughtless and rude and likes to gossip
- He holds that political or theological opinion because he's stupid and immoral

For ourselves, we tend to assume "situational" explanations.

- I don't have a job because the economy's in terrible shape and my skills are undervalued
- I bought a new car because I needed one of course (and it's really quite a humble purchase considering what so-and-so recently bought)
- I said that thing, it's true, but I didn't mean it how they interpreted it—they always take things out of context!
- My political opinions are the result of reasoned analysis not indoctrination!

And of course all of this takes place with our own social context—a context which provides endless opportunities to confirm our biases and to attribute all kinds of motives to others.

We live in an increasingly digital context characterized by a tidal wave of information that daily rolls over us that we can't possibly keep up with, and where it's often virtually impossible to sort out fact from fiction.

We live in a context that is saturated with manipulative advertising in every form.

We live in a context that conditions us to expect to be entertained rather than to seek after the truth.

And we live in a context that trains us daily to make snap judgments about everything from the news of the day to the behaviours of our neighbours, rather than to exercise patience and charity, to withhold judgment.

I worry that we are allowing our social context to determine how we see and hear. I fear that we are becoming more reactionary, less reflective, less willing to consider opposing viewpoints, more defensive and protective of our own identities and assumptions and views, rather than living with open hands and curiosity and good will toward our neighbours.

I worry that we often assume the worst in those we disagree with or annoy and offend us, whether *out there* in the world or *in here* in the church.

I worry about how easy and tempting it is to consistently interpret the thoughts and behaviours and words of others in ways that minimize the multiple factors and limitations that go into *all* human thinking and acting and speaking.

I worry about how easy it is for eyes to see what they want to see, for our ears to hear what they want to hear, and about the effects that our seeing and hearing has on our relationships, on our unity as a church, and on our witness to the watching world.

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I've spent a lot of time describing who we are and where we are. Perhaps too much time. 😊

I want to end by asking a very simple question: In light of *all this*—in light of what we see and hear and why we tend to see and hear it—what is the word of the Lord to us on this second Sunday of Advent?

Advent is about at least two very important things.

1. Being reminded about the nature of the one for whom Israel awaited prior to Christ's first advent, and the one for whom we wait to come in glory
2. Preparing our hearts to receive this one; aligning our hearts and minds and lives with this king who has come and will come again

We read the words from the prophet Isaiah this morning about the shoot that will emerge out of the root of Jesse.

His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. **He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth...**

It is tempting when reading Isaiah passages throughout Advent to focus on the marvelous poetic imagery of wolves and lambs and children playing without fear beside snakes and swords being beaten into plowshares and all that. These visions of Isaiah give us such a marvelous hope to live into and they fire our imaginations in countless ways.

But this week, I found myself focusing not on what this promised one will bring about, what he will *do*, but with these few lines that talk about how this shoot from the stump of Jesse will *be*.

He will be characterized by:

- Wisdom.
- Understanding.
- A spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

Unlike us, this one will not judge in reactionary and self-serving ways, he will not hear only what he wants to hear; he will not see selfishly and reactively; his seeing and hearing will not be affected by the limitations of social location as all of our seeing and hearing inevitably is.

Rather, he will see truly, comprehensively, he will hear with mercy and unflinching honesty. He will act with righteousness and justice on behalf of the poor, the weak, the vulnerable. He will judge justly and impartially.

**He will see and hear fully, completely, truly, justly.**

He will see and hear as we do not, as we *cannot*.

Perhaps on this second Sunday of Advent we could use this most basic and necessary of reminders that God is God and we are not.

This is a lesson that human beings have always needed to learn and relearn and relearn again, ever since the first humans in the garden uttered those fateful words, “Did God really say...?”

Since then, human history has been a history of forgetting our place, imagining that we see and hear and know what only God sees and hears and knows fully.

Advent is a good time to remember our place.

There’s a line in carol we sing each year: *Let every heart prepare him room*.

This is in many ways the task of Advent. What does it mean for our hearts to prepare him room? Especially in light of the ways that our seeing and hearing so often goes awry, and the ways our hearts so easily squeeze out room for Christ and his way.

Our gospel text this morning gives us a good word: repent.

We don’t like this word, perhaps. Maybe it brings to mind all kinds of severe finger wagging or self-righteous overbearing preachers who were always going on and on about sin.

But we need this word. It is a word that means simply to turn around. To go in a different direction. To stop relying on our own imagined superiority and self-righteousness, to stop closing ourselves off to Christ and his kingdom.

[R]epentance includes feeling sorry for one’s personal sins, but it is much more. To repent is to take a clear-minded look at the ways **in which one’s life colludes with the assumptions and behaviors of the old age**, to turn away from such complicity, and to turn towards God and the attitudes and actions of the realm of heaven.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3090](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3090)

To turn away from the ways in which we imagine we are God and to turn *toward* bearing fruit.

I am convinced that one of the ways in which we do this is in a context where it's so easy to judge quickly based on what our eyes see and our ears hear is, simply, to emulate Jesus.

Philippians 2:3-5

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. 5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus...

If even Jesus—the only one who ever saw and heard truly and completely took on the nature of a servant, set aside his rights and his “rightness,” and looked to the interests of others, how much more should we who *don't* always see and hear truly do this?

I think this is a good word for us in these early days of Advent.

It is a good word for our marriages, for our families, for our church (local, provincial, national, global), for our social discourse, for our political engagement, for our world.

I am convinced that looking to the interests of others ahead of our own, of interpreting the word and actions of others with charity and good will, of interpreting our own words and actions with just a hint of skepticism are some of the important and desperately necessary ways in which we as a church can refuse to “collude with the assumptions and behaviors of the old age” and “toward the attitudes and actions of the realm of heaven.”

It is a way of anticipating the fulfillment of the hope of Isaiah, the future that God has promised that this shoot from the stump of Jesse will make possible.

A future of lions and lambs, yes, but also above all that, a future of where the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

A future where, as one commentator puts it,

**The earth will be infused with the reality of God**, and it shall be as comprehensive as the waters of the sea.<sup>2</sup>

May God give us eyes to see and ears to hear not only *what* God would have us see and hear, but *how* he would have us do it.

Amen.



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<sup>2</sup> Bruce C. Birch, "Exegetical Perspective on Isaiah 11:1-10" in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol. 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 31.