

Fourth Sunday in Advent December 18, 2022

## LISTEN TO GOD

*Isaiah 51:1-6*

Scripture Readings

**Deuteronomy 18:15-19**

**Philippians 4:4-7**

**Luke 1:39-56**

Hymns

**96, 73, 92 (Worship Supplement alt. #711), 89 (W.S. alt. #709)**

Hymns from The Lutheran Hymnal (1941) unless otherwise noted

+ In the Name of Jesus Christ. Amen. +

*“Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, You who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were hewn, And to the hole of the pit from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, And to Sarah who bore you; For I called him alone, And blessed him and increased him.” For the LORD will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden, And her desert like the garden of the LORD; Joy and gladness will be found in it, Thanksgiving and the voice of melody. “Listen to Me, My people; And give ear to Me, O My nation: For law will proceed from Me, And I will make My justice rest As a light of the peoples. My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth, And My arms will judge the peoples; The coastlands will wait upon Me, And on My arm they will trust. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, And look on the earth beneath. For the heavens will vanish away like smoke, The earth will grow old like a garment, And those who dwell in it will die in like manner; But My salvation will be forever, And My righteousness will not be abolished.”*

Dearly Beloved Fellow Believers,

Christmas is a season of beautiful sounds. No other season has such an extensive array of songs written specifically for it, which are played at no other time of year. The best of them tell of Jesus the Savior and the

meaning of His birth. These are very much worth hearing. Each Christmas season they proclaim the Gospel to multitudes, including many who do not otherwise hear it. The real sound of Christmas is the sound of the Gospel, whether in song or in the spoken word. Everything else is just background music.

We can't avoid the background music; it's wherever we go. But we can choose what we really listen to. We can choose which songs we play and sing. We can give our attention to the Word of God, at home and in church.

That we may listen to the Word—carefully and devoutly—we should understand that God is calling us in the Word. Like the teacher addressing a room full of students or like the parent calling to a child, God wants our attention. He has something to say to us that we very much need to hear. In our text God says this explicitly, “**Listen to Me.**” Two times He says it. And it is to His people that He says it. He wants to calm their fears, to give them peace for their days and hope for their future.

Since we are God's children through faith in His Son, He is here calling also to us to listen to Him. Let us tune out all the background sounds of the Christmas season and hear what it is that He has to say to us.

## **LISTEN TO GOD**

### **In this barren world, God alone offers life.**

God's call to listen to Him is an inviting call, a welcoming call. Here God is addressing His children, the believing remnant of His people. In other parts of Isaiah, God addresses the whole nation, both the believing and the unbelieving. In those parts the tone of the message is quite different, for there He is calling the unbelieving to return to the Lord. There His purpose is to bring them to a knowledge of their sins, to humble them, to bring them to repentance. But here God addresses those who were already penitent. They were people who were very conscious

of their sins and who grieved over them. God addresses them as “***you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the LORD.***” When we notice this, we see that God’s purpose here is to comfort them. It is not a word of rebuke that God has for the people He addresses here. If there is any rebuke in it, it is of a very gentle kind. God is telling His people that they should not despair of His mercy and help. Instead they should listen to Him and let Him encourage and strengthen them.

Why were these humble, believing people so discouraged? It was because they were seeing the spiritual decline of their nation. Many of their countrymen were going through the motions of worship but their life and conduct showed that their hearts were not in it. They were not trusting in God. Seeing this, the godly mourned and were afraid of the divine judgment that was to come on their nation.

Our situation is not so far removed from theirs. We, like the believing people of Israel, are grieved at the spiritual deterioration in our society. We mourn when we see and hear the contempt for God and His Word, when we hear His name taken in vain, when we hear evil defended and good belittled. Do we not tremble at the discipline that God may apply? At the same time, we know our own hearts, that we ourselves are guilty of many things before God. We need the comforting words that God speaks to His people here.

Where does God direct His people to comfort them? He tells them to remember where they came from. “***Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug,***” He says. Both things mentioned here are incapable of producing life. One is lifeless rock. The other is a hole or pit, that is, a cistern. It is not a well which produces water but a cistern into which water must be poured. God is telling them to remember that He created them out of nothing. He gave them life. Then God reminds them of their ancestry, that they were descended from Abraham and Sarah, a couple who remained childless into their old age. For them to have one child required a divine miracle. Yet from this unpromising source God produced an entire nation.

How is this comforting? God is reminding His people that He is the source of their life. So they should not despair when they saw their nation declining and sliding toward judgment. They still had Him as their God. He would forgive their sins and sustain them through whatever trials they would have to pass.

So then we also should not despair when we see the ungodliness of the world and when we see the sin in our hearts and lives. We still have God, and He is the source of all life. This world doesn't have life in it and can't give us life. But God has given us life in His Son Jesus Christ. Christ is the eternal living God who came down from heaven. He brought life into this world when He united His sinless divine nature with our human nature, when He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. This is taught in His names, the Light of the world and the Bread of life.

### **In this passing world, God alone offers eternal salvation.**

We also should not despair when we see that our world is full of disease and death and when we feel our own strength failing and our life ebbing away. Here again God says, "***Listen to Me, My people.***" Then He announces: "***My salvation has gone forth.***" There is a way of escape from the death of this world. The unbelieving aren't interested in it; they prefer to stake their hopes on this world alone. They want only what this world has to offer. But to those who long for salvation from sin and death, God offers it. "***Law will proceed from Me,***" God says. A careful examination of the Hebrew words is helpful here. "Law" here is not Law as distinct from Gospel; the word here means doctrine, instruction, God's Word. "***My justice***" is the justice that prevails as the rule of right in God's kingdom, namely, grace. We can see that this is a Gospel announcement because God promises to make His justice "***rest as a light.***" And the proclamation of God's grace, His forgiveness and life, is not just for Israel; it is for "***the peoples***" and "***the coastlands,***" that is, all nations, all peoples.

The announcement here is of the salvation, the deliverance from sin and death that has come to us in Jesus Christ. He is the Light to lighten the Gentiles, as well as the glory of God's people Israel (Luke 2:32). He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29, 36). Jesus also expressed this when He said, "***God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.***" (John 3:16)

In Jesus we have deliverance from sin and death. In Jesus we have the promise of eternal life in heaven. What good news that is, especially when we consider the alternative, which is the life that we have in this world, and that's it. If any think that this world holds a lot of promise, God invites them to contemplate the future of the world and their own future in it. "***For the heavens will vanish away like smoke,***" He says. The created heavens, the sun, moon, planets, and stars, have the appearance of permanence. But God says they will finally vanish like the smoke that rises from an extinguished candle. It is visible for a few seconds, and then it is gone. The earth looks permanent. But God says that it will "***grow old like a garment.***" The word here refers to a piece of clothing that falls apart because of rotteness. Anyone who doesn't believe this needs to contemplate the next sentence, "***And those who dwell in it will die in like manner.***" Some may not believe that the heavens and the earth will be brought to an end, but no one can deny those who live here die and that the death rate here is 100%. But in contrast to this God says, "***But My salvation will be forever, and My righteousness will not be abolished.***"

Bearing in mind these words from our God we can see why we need to listen to Him during this Christmas season. It is only in the Word of God, only in Jesus Christ that we have something lasting. Everything else having to do with the holidays is temporary—nice while it lasts, but gone with the passing year. But in the Christmas Gospel we have eternal life and salvation. Amen.

—Rev. John Klatt

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