

“Paying Attention”

1 Kings 8:26-30; Ephesians 1:3-14;
Luke 2:9-14; John 12:27-30

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He lay there rubbing his hands, thinking it was a cold night, trying to warm himself under a threadbare blanket under a brilliant set of stars. As he lay there, he thought, “I’m getting too old for this.” He began to think back over his life and wonder, “Why is it that I’m here. I had so many other dreams as a young boy. Now I lie here by this fire that’s not quite warm enough, hearing the sheep in the background. I’m a shepherd hired out to watch somebody else’s sheep. It’s not what I wanted to do with my life. What about all those things I wanted – my needs, my desires, my hopes, my fears?”

He lay there and as he thought about where he had ended up, he began to get a little depressed. It really didn’t help with the cold. What should he have been thinking about? Maybe there was something that would have warmed his soul more. Maybe he should have been paying attention to the bright star in the sky. Should he have been paying attention to the state of the state, or thinking about what God was doing? It’s kind of hard to think about that in that kind of circumstance, to think beyond himself.

Of course, we know what happens next. We have the angels appear singing, “Glory to God in the highest” and announcing the Savior’s birth. He’s probably not cold anymore. He probably forgets that in the midst of that moment. We always assume that the shepherds just run off to Bethlehem – that would warm them up as well – off to see that child.

As we think about the shepherd’s life – who knows if that’s what one of them was thinking about that night – it makes me think about what we’re paying attention to. As he lay there, he was paying attention to his own life. Isn’t that an easy thing to do, to pay attention to my own life, my own needs, what’s happening around me as it affects me. It made me think about what I’m paying attention to and how, in that moment when the angels appear, it was very easy for him to pay attention to God.

I don’t know about you, but I have not had that kind of experience. I would guess that not many of us have. Angels appearing and singing to us—it’s easy to pay attention in that moment, but it doesn’t happen to most of us. Some of us may have had other kinds of experiences, moments where we felt God was truly present, something unusual, some kind of experience when we know the Spirit is present, and it gets our attention. In fact, if we think through history, there are people who, after God had gotten their attention, wanted to figure out how they could open themselves again to that kind of experience. They thought about God coming and interacting.

Even then, when you have gone through one of those experiences, oftentimes after a few days you begin to wonder, “Is that as real as I thought it was? How do I fit it into the rest of life?” It might have gotten my attention for the moment. My guess is that there is something in our lives that got our attention for the moment and that lead us to be here,

for example, thinking about God. How easy it is as we even come here to just think about what I need from God. But I wonder how much attention we pay to God.

So, I think we can solve that by making a big sign telling us to PAY ATTENTION. That will do it. Or, at least I wish it would. When we think about what we're paying attention to, just to say "Pay attention!" probably doesn't matter that much. Maybe if I added flashing lights and really good graphics, would we pay attention then? We have a lot of things out there doing that exact thing to us to get our attention. PAY ATTENTION, it says. Pay attention. But what do we pay attention to?

Maybe if we had angels show up in our lives, we would pay attention. Maybe. But it makes me think what do I really pay attention to and why? Sometimes it's simply something that gets my attention, but generally there's something more. I need to know why I should pay attention. There's a way in which I pay attention to the things that are important to me. So I guess the question is, in a sense, is God important enough to pay attention to? We tend to answer that "yes." God deserves our attention, right? If nothing else because God is incredibly incredible. Making the world, giving us life, all these wonderful incredible things. If we really stop and think about it a minute, God must be pretty incredible. How many times can I use the word incredible? Pay attention. God deserves it. That's one reason.

We just got done with a series of sermons on three different gifts God has given us. He gave us the gift of light coming and showing us anew our lives. He gave us the gift of new life and life itself. And last week, we talked about the gift of grace. Someone who gives us all those things is worth paying attention to. Another reason to pay attention.

Then, if that weren't enough, this one who comes to us can show us the way through life, and has a will that is important to pay attention to because it matters about how things turn out for us. It might be valuable to pay attention to the will of God, because that will influences our lives and the world around us and how things all end up.

So there are at least three reasons to pay attention. I think there's another thing that happens when we begin to pay attention and that's that God pulls us together into a community and creates a family of faith. I think it's an intrinsic need that we have to be part of a community. When we pay attention to what God is doing, we get pulled into community. It's a valuable thing. It's one of the things he's doing by gathering us around the table. He's pulling us into a community. But another thing, I'll make this the final thing, is that he's calling us into relationship. That's part of what he's doing at the table as well. It's not just forming a community; it's a community with God through Jesus Christ. He's inviting us into a relationship with that incredible God. I've just mentioned at least five reasons to pay attention to God, and yet I realize how much of my life goes on with paying much attention at all.

So I'm going to suggest that there are three things we can do: we can look, we can listen, and we can laud. We don't use that last word much, but it fit the alliteration. We can look around us. We can look and see what God has made and the wonder of it.

We can look and see the gifts God has given us. We can look at scripture and see what God has told us. That moves right into listen. We can listen to that word. We can look and listen to the word that God has given us. There's another way of listening: listening in prayer – listening that can include scripture or can simply allow us to sit before God and listen. Who knows, God may speak in ways we don't expect when we make room and we actually pay attention and listen.

Finally we can laud. That's that old word for praise, give glory to. We can laud. We can give praise and glory and thanksgiving to God. We can look for the things in our lives, the ways we see that God might be at work, that are praiseworthy, things we can give thanks for.

My invitation as we gather around the table this week, is to remember again the God that came to us to free us from our sin, but it's not just to free us from our sin, really. It's to free us from that which keeps us from being in relationship with God. It's freeing us up to be in that relationship, to be part of God's family, to gather together.

So as we go through the week, we can remember the God who gathers us together as we listen, look, and laud.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, how easy it is to be so focused on my own concerns, the things that I think are going to impact my life, the hopes that I'm anxious about, that I forget to see you, to remember that you are present, your grace is among us and given to us, your love is shared. Indeed, you deserve our attention simply as one who loves us and who we would love in return. Lord, may we look and see, listen and hear, laud and give you glory, honor, and praise for who you are in our lives, now and always. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.