

**Summary:**

1-12-20 Message "Horton Hears a Who"

**Detail:**

>>>TITLE SLIDE<<<

Years ago I developed tinnitus, or ringing in the ears.

I don't remember when it started, I don't know what caused it, but what I do know is that it is constant.

There is no time of the day or night when I do not hear a constant high-pitched whistle or tone in my ears - kind of like the feedback you get from a microphone, only it doesn't stop.

Sometimes it seems louder than others - not sure why - but it's my constant companion.

So that being the case, being in silence for a silent prayer, a moment of silence, whatever, is all relative for me. I don't remember the last time I actually experienced true silence.

That said, whenever I've been tested, they tell me my hearing is good. I struggle hearing conversation in a room of people, like in a restaurant or a public place, but according to the experts and the tests, my hearing is good. Sometimes, though, even with my "good" hearing, I still need to cup a hand behind my ear to make sure I'm able to hear the person talking to me.

We're used to thinking about or hearing that we are the hands and feet of God in the world, that God has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet.

And we understand that to mean, among other things, that the work God calls us to is only done through us. Taking this idea one step further, the Jewish mystic Martin Buber, in a passage from his seminal work *I and Thou*, writes that God says,

“I have placed my **hearing** in the deafness of mortals.” That is, God only hears what we hear. As author Elizabeth Bassett writes,

*“If this should be even partly true what a tremendous responsibility it places upon us to listen, to listen to each other with our whole attention, with our hearts, but what a difficult thing to do.”* ~

Elizabeth Bassett in “Beyond the Blue Mountains: Wisdom and Compassion on Living and Dying” (p. 93)

This is a truly sobering, if not frightening idea if we think about it; to suggest that God is only able to hear what we hear, what we attune our ears toward.

That would suggest that just as we are the hands and feet of God in the world, we are also God’s ears.

If we don’t listen, if we don’t hear with God’s ear the cry of the poor and the oppressed, then we can’t act as God’s hands and feet in those situations.

And while I struggle with the implications of this idea,

I can’t argue with it, I can’t deny it. When Jesus tells us that we encounter him, that we serve him, when and how we serve the least of these his brothers and sisters, how can I separate the function of my hands and feet from the function of my ears in that service? So I struggle with this idea.

As I referenced briefly in my message two weeks ago, in Genesis 4:10, after Cain has killed Abel, God says to him, “*What did you do? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.*”

And we’re to understand this metaphorical language as meaning that God hears the cries of the oppressed in the world, God hears the victim’s cries.

Sometimes, it seems, God is the only one who hears the cries, or is at least the only one listening.

When the world turns deafened ears on the cries of the oppressed and the poor, the hungry and the heartbroken, the victimized and the violated, sometimes it seems that God **must be** the only one who hears. Because, how can we as human beings - made in the image of God - hear these cries, and not act? How can we, as Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, hear these cries and not respond as the Samaritan responded?

Sometimes it seems that God, like Horton the Elephant, is the only one who hears the cries of the smallest, the weakest, the least, the last, and the lost of our world.

>>>GO TO “HORTON WITH FLOWER” SLIDE<<<

Horton, the big-eared elephant in Dr. Seuss’ world, functions as a God-figure in many ways - he hears a sound that none of the other animals in this storybook world can hear. He hears the cries of help from the *Whos* that fall on deaf ears for everyone else.

The *Whos*’ entire world - filled with tiny *Whos* of all sizes, genders, and ages - exists on a tiny speck of dust too small for even Horton the elephant to see.

But with his large ears Horton can hear them loud and clear, and he makes it his mission to protect his tiny friends. “After all,” Horton says, “a person is a person, no matter how small.”

>>>CHANGE SLIDE<<<

And having heard the story, we know the travails Horton goes through, the things he puts up with, the trials he experiences, in trying to save this little world that only he can hear. Depending on our lot in life, when we hear this story we may find it easy to identify with the tiny *Whos* - trying so desperately to be heard as their voices fall on so many deaf ears. So much of the world today is desperately trying to be heard, but sometimes it seems that no one is listening or hearing. In fact, in the passage from Romans that we read, Paul talks about how all of creation longs to be heard - groaning and moaning for redemption.

The Bible’s most important message is that God came into the world, revealing God’s self in the flesh in Jesus Christ, in order to save all of creation.

And even when we feel *Who-like* in thinking that our cries for help are going nowhere, we can live with confidence that the God who knows even the tiniest sparrow hears, Horton-like, the cries of the world.

>>>GO TO “HORTON” SLIDE<<<

At other times, or for people who are at a different place in life, though, we may identify more closely with Horton in our efforts to hear the cries of the groaning world and come to its aid.

Sometimes, though, we have difficulty making out the cries, understanding the depth of the needs, or interpreting how we are to respond to the world’s cries.

If you are a dog or cat owner you may have learned to distinguish between particular barks or meows or whatever when listening to your pet.

And many parents can sleep through a cacophony of noises during the night - rumbling traffic, a whirring air conditioner, even thunderstorms - yet be awakened instantly by the faintest sound of their child. Unfortunately, too often, too many identify with those who would deny the voices of those too small, too insignificant, too poor, too powerless, to be heard.

>>>GO TO "THREE GLOBES" SLIDE<<<

While humanity is unique in God's creation - the only species that we know of that has been given the power of reasoning, the only one said to have been created in the image of God - Scripture tells us that all of creation is important to God.

In fact, all of creation is described by God as good - from the smallest "Who-like" single cell amoebae in the sea to the largest Horton-esque mammals - all of it is described as good. That is why as humans, God entrusts the stewardship of all creation to us.

The idea of stewardship means to care for creation, not the thoughtless use, abuse, or destruction of creation as the word "dominion" is often misinterpreted to mean.

When I consider the passage from Romans about all of creation groaning, I can't help but think about the natural systems God put in place, the air, the water, the plant life, the animals, that are crying out under the stress and strain of what we have done and continue doing to Earth. *The Columbus Dispatch* recently reported that the number of birds

in the world has decreased by billions in the last four decades, largely due to destruction of habitat and the use of pesticides and chemicals. In the ongoing wildfires in Australia, driven by climate change, officials are reporting that over one billion animals have died. I believe God hears the cries of our planet just as God heard the cries of Abel's blood, and just as Horton hears the cries of the *Whos*. The bigger question is, though, do we?

>>>GO TO "De Chardin" SLIDE<<<

Pierre de Chardin was both a Roman Catholic priest and a paleontologist - a scientist studying fossilized remains. One day while on an archaeological dig, in his role as priest, he realized that when it was time to celebrate the Mass, or Holy Communion, he had neither bread nor wine, which is kind of important. He looked at the world around him, and realized that while he had no bread or wine, all creation possessed a certain sacredness or holiness because of the essential mystery of the Christian faith proclaimed in John's gospel: "The Word became flesh."

In other words, God not only created this universe in which we live, full of grandeur, but God also entered into it in Jesus Christ. God offered up the whole of creation as God's gift, a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, in communion with us. God has entered into creation by Jesus coming and being present with us, leaving an eternal, indelible stamp on the world.

>>>GO TO "IF YOU LOVE THE CREATOR..." SLIDE<

That's why it's so important that we care for this world and all of creation therein. We mustn't give in to greed, and lust, and other forces that tend to destroy rather than build up the wholeness of the creation of God in this world that God called "good." The bottom line

remains for us, as stated in our reading from Psalm 24, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.” We do not own this world.

But as God’s stewards and as participants in God’s plan of redemption, we must hear and respond to the world’s cries, whether those cries come from the planet itself or from the weakest or most vulnerable of all the living beings on the planet, represented in our story as little *Whos* living on a speck of dust.

Christ reminds us that our love of God is reflected in how we treat the least of these.

This responsibility includes the obligation to care for the earth. The Rev. James Kemp, a retired United Methodist minister, recounts the story of a young man interviewing for a job as an usher in a movie theater. During the interview the manager asked the young man an important question: “Son, what would you do if we had a crowded theater and fire broke out?”

The young man thought for a minute and then replied, “Well, you don’t have to worry about me.

You don’t have to worry about me at all.

If it’s a crowded theater and a fire breaks out, I would get out safely.”

Obviously, not EXACTLY the answer the manager was looking for, but it reflects the spirit of many of our answers to such questions. We often think instinctively only about ourselves; it doesn’t matter what happens to anyone else so long as we get out safely, so long as we get our way, so long as there’s enough for us.

That's not the answer Horton would give, nor should it be the answer given by faithful Christians.

>>>GO TO "I'LL FLY AWAY" SLIDE<<<

Far too many Christians with an "Escapist - Rapture Me Now -I'll Fly Away" kind of faith, don't give much thought to environmental issues, to pollution or climate change, because they think they're punching a ticket to heaven and all of this is just going to be destroyed anyway.

They think it's okay to just use and abuse the planet because they're "outta here!"

Well, that flies in the face of so many biblical teachings that I hardly know where to start.

So let's begin in the beginning.

The Psalmist writes that God created the heaven and the earth and all that is in them. And God created humanity in God's image and declared them good.

And Scripture tells us that God is a God of love who seeks to save creation, not destroy it; a loving God who not only will not simply destroy what God created in love and declared to be good, but who, like Horton, will go to great extremes - even becoming one of us - in order to save all of creation. As God's hands and feet, humans were endowed by God to be stewards of the earth - not to suck the life out of it and destroy it because we think the end is near!

I believe in God's promise of eternal life, of our immortality in the spirit, but we need not and should not affirm that belief at the expense

of the earth - God's creation - and the billions of God's beloved children who live on it.

We're called to do whatever we can to listen to and be sensitive to the earth's cries, not just because we have to - it is the only planet we have, after all - but because it's the right thing to do, because the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. We **must** hear its cries.

>>>GO TO "HORTON TIED UP" SLIDE<<<

And if, as Buber suggests, God has placed God's hearing in the deafness of us mortals, then we must overcome the ringing in our ears that comes from out of control militarism, nationalism, capitalism, xenophobia, and the like and must, like Horton, hear the cries of other people, no matter how small or insignificant they may be in the world's eyes, or even how "undeserving" some may believe them to be. In the eyes and ears of God, there is no acceptable level of economic or militaristic collateral damage. In fact, a good case can be made that the growing violence, sectarianism, polarization, and even terrorism in the world is caused, in large part, because we no longer listen to one another as human beings and either only see others as a means to enrich ourselves or our nations, or we ignore others totally and only make plans to save ourselves in case of fire.

We often surround ourselves only with other people who think like us and believe like us - life in an echo chamber - and then when we encounter someone who thinks or believes differently, instead of trying to get to know them and learn from them and share with them - we label them "Other." We castigate them, we denigrate them, ridicule or marginalize them. Or worse, seek to destroy them. And the church is as guilty as any other part of our society in this regard. Is it any wonder that the world is erupting in violence and bloodshed at every

corner? It's not because we've removed prayer from our schools, it's because we've removed prayer from our lives!

It's because instead of listening for what God is trying to tell us in God's still, small, even *Who-like* voice, we're too busy in our prideful arrogance telling God **how** to be God, what **we** want, and what **we would do** and how **we** would do it if **WE** were God.

Frankly, most of the time we can't hear God because we won't shut up! When the people who feel ignored, who feel trampled on, who feel like the Who's in our story, feel like nobody will listen to them, that nobody cares about their needs or their cries - they will **MAKE** themselves heard, sometimes through acts of desperate and indiscriminate violence, which is often the only language that will get some peoples' attention.

Some Christians glibly throw out the phrase, "Scripture is clear..." when talking about certain subjects in the Bible and culture, whether Scripture is actually clear or not. One area about which I think all would agree that Scripture is clear is its instructions to us to take special care of those people at the margins, at the bottom - especially widows, orphans, refugees, and prisoners - but not exclusively those who fit into these very narrow categories.

We're called to care for all those who are downtrodden and have been marginalized from the spheres of influence in our society as well.

This includes people who can't afford the clothes or the cars that are considered signs of success in our society.

It means making more room for people from ethnic, racial, religious, and gender or sexual identity minority groups who are denied their full

humanity and human rights in both overt and covert ways. And certainly no child or woman should ever be subjected to physical or emotional abuse or assault. All of these are among the *Whos* of our world whose cries we must listen for with greater sensitivity, and respond to with greater urgency and concern in the name and the love of Jesus Christ.

>>>GO TO “PSALM 24 EARTH” SLIDE<<<

The world belongs to God, and everything - and everyone - in it. Each of us is a beloved Child of God, created in the image of God. And God’s world has been redeemed. Not only did God create this world and call it good, but when God saw what a mess we had made of it, God came in Jesus Christ to renew, restore, and even resurrect the world.

Christ came and lived among us until people used him, abused, and eventually killed him, dumping him outside of Jerusalem like so much trash. The good news for us this day is that Jesus didn’t stay trashed.

>>>GO TO “HE LIVES” SLIDE<<<

As the old hymn proclaims,

*“He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today.*

*He walks with me and talks with me along life’s narrow way. He lives, He lives, salvation to impart! You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.”*

That is the gospel promise, that Christ lives again, and he provide his followers with redeeming power that allows them to hear the world’s moans and groans as they wait for and work towards its full redemption.

>>>GO TO “A PERSON’S A PERSON...” SLIDE<<<

So let us, like the *Whos*, remember that no matter how weak our cries may be, God is listening. Let us also, like Horton, always listen for the cries that others are not yet able, or willing, to hear. And most importantly, let us not ignore those cries, but rather as God's hands, feet, and ears in this world, step in and make a difference, because as Horton said, "a person's a person, no matter how small." Amen.