

# **By Listening, We Join God in Birthing New Life**

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Over the last several years, a children's pageant has replaced the sermon at the later service on Epiphany Sunday. Although the story is enacted on Christmas Eve's, little else is the same. Except for the narrator, there are no assigned roles. There are no rehearsals or even a run-through before the actual performance. There are no lines to memorize. No, the Epiphany pageant is different. The cast is whoever shows up on that Sunday and, as the children arrive, they take dibs on the part they want to play. Usually Mary and the angels are taken by the girls and the boys opt for shepherds and wise men. But there are no rules except everyone gets a part. There are also no rules about the costumes as various pieces are examined as possibilities. Thus, a shepherd might top a cotton tunic with a velvet glittered king's hat. Mary's blue dress might be adorned with a sash of glittered cloth meant for an angel. It doesn't matter: it's the pageant on Epiphany Sunday, one last chance to tell the central story and belief about the birth of Jesus, God in human flesh.

However, this year the children are busy meeting with their Prayer Buddy so no Epiphany pageant. Yet, like many traditions, it's hard to let them go. So, I offer a sermon today with the same sweeping revisit of the Christmas story, knowing that I can't match the cuteness of Trinity's children, even by donning the costume of the surprised cow at the manger on Christmas morning. (Put on "cow hat", look surprised and moo)

My "pageant" of Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds and wise men is about listening. This last savoring of Advent and Christmas is noting how often listening is part of the story. In fact, listening occurs so often, I believe by listening, we join God in birthing new life. Mary and Joseph begin by listening to Gabriel and learning something utterly new about themselves. Through this encounter, they are invited to rethink their place in God's story of new life. They must let go of preconceived notions of how they thought their lives would unfold and be open to the unexpected, letting go of how others might judge them. Their listening gives power to the central truth they discover within themselves. They join God in birthing new life.

A group of shepherds have their chance to listen. In the stillness and dark of night, they hear a heavenly song announcing that a baby's birth brings hope for a different world, one of peace and compassion. As improbable as that must have seemed to this group of outcasts, they are listening enough to propose a trip to check it out. And they listen to each other. Amazing to me because I don't assume that any particular groupings of outcast necessarily comprise a compatible community.

Yet, somehow, this community of shepherds listen to each other. A sense of union and communion draws them forward together on a most unlikely search. By listening, they join God in birthing new life. They join Joseph and Mary around the infant Jesus, where Mary is continuing to listen - to listen inside, to "ponder these things in her heart...". By listening to the quiet and depth of her soul, Mary continues to birth new life. Finally, the 3 wise magi arrive to add their own experiences of listening. They have come from King Herod who listened to scripture passages telling about the birth of a divine king. They do not return to King Herod as instructed. After listening to a dream, they change their travel plans.

However, finding the experiences of listening in either scripture or our lives begs the issue of how we're listening. After all, we know there is more to listening than noise entering our ears. Listening is also about the depth of our hearing as our Advent-Epiphany story illustrates. The most immediate level of listening is with our ego self, the part we need to operate in the world. It's our ego self which is alarmed and afraid of strange experiences, when we feel out of control and threatened. As each of the story's characters hears about the birth of God's new life, fear is their first reaction. Even learned men from afar must get passed any fear of long-distant travel.

Yet, their listening next moves from the small ego self to the thinking mind. Mary asks "how can this be?". Joseph reasons that he will put his betrothed Mary away quietly without honoring the marriage contract. The shepherds override their fear and propose a plan. "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place...". The wise men are certainly thinking when they follow protocol to visit the local king. King Herod handles his initial fear of a royal rival by having advisors cite relevant ancient scripture passages.

However, it is in this thinking mind where listening often gets stuck. Having worked through our initial feeling reactions, we automatically start using our brain. After all, educational, parental, professional input tells us that's the final destination for what we hear, the place we process information and feelings. It's our thinking mind that serves us best. It is with our mind that we sort through values and determine full truth.

Yet, our pageant story offers a third level of listening: listening in the contemplative heart. Without this level of listening, God's story of new life in the birth of Jesus would have been a different story. Mary could not have believed in the gift of what she would bear into the world or pondered at the manger. Joseph would not have had the courage to face societal shame and ridicule. The shepherds' routine and sense of duty would have denied them their own song when returning to the field - "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard...". The wise men would have lacked the deeper wisdom to pay attention to their dream and disobey civil authority. In the end, only King Herod listens solely to his ego self and thinking mind. Only King Herod refuses to hear God's invitation to join in the birth of new life. And skipping ahead in the story, we know what can happen when listening only feeds ego drives and idolizes the rational mind. King Herod orders the massacre of all children two-years-old and younger. Refusing to listen with the heart has serious consequences for more than just kings.

In each day of this new year, God invites us to join in the birthing of new life. The possible places and people are endless. There is no shortage of chances to listen. That is not our issue. Instead, we are called through Jesus Christ to practice deep listening as he did, to hear beyond our urges to be right, in control and protect. We are to find that deeper space where more than our egos and the logical, rational training of our minds can offer an additional perspective and truth, the space of compassion, forgiveness, love, hope and trust. By listening from our spiritual hearts, we join God in birthing new life. Amen.

*\*\*I'm indebted to Tilden Edwards for the categories of listening from "Aging from the Contemplative Heart" written in *Oneing, vol., no. 2 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2013), 47-49.**