

Christians believe in the God who speaks. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” It follows logically, then, that we are to listen because what God says is worth paying attention to.

The shared experience of Christians throughout the centuries, beginning with the early Church, is that this ability to listen not only doesn’t come naturally, but is a discipline that has to be learned and practiced repeatedly. This is the reason that over time reading the Bible regularly, attending Church regularly, and receiving the Sacrament regularly shape and form us into, we hope, “the full stature of Christ.” There are apparently no shortcuts.

St. Mary’s is undergoing a time of intentional listening for our parish. As the Covid pandemic continues to ravage much of the world, we have been entrusted with a window of relative calm to reflect on the profoundly changed landscape of our lives from just 18 months ago.

The essential first step is to silence the self and “my” answers to these issues. To be blunt: the first step is “to shut up” and learn to listen. To paraphrase Thomas Merton, “If my truth cannot receive your truth, then there can be no truth between us.” The prophet Elijah was in as tough a place as any of us will ever experience as Jezebel was trying to kill him. It was only in silence that he heard “the still, small voice of God.”

Mary “pondered” in her heart that she was chosen to be the God-bearer, whatever that meant and might entail. Jesus was silent in front of Pontius Pilate knowing that everything that could be said had been said. Crises force us to listen; Christians are meant to be people who don’t need a crisis in order to pay attention because we are a people who pray, i.e. people who long to hear God’s voice and do God’s will in response.

Listening always precedes action because we act not in our own strength but the Spirit of God. My favorite verse of Scripture says it best for me. “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord of hosts.” (Zechariah 4:6b)

In practical terms what might this look like? First and foremost the leadership of our parish want to create spaces where we can talk with one another, lament and support one another, and celebrate our life in Christ as sisters and brothers of one Body.

Excerpt from a 2021 letter written by Fr. Andrew T.P. Merrow, Rector of St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Arlington, VA.