

I remember the morning vividly. Worship had ended and I was at the door talking with folk as they left. One young man (30-ish) approached, visibly upset. When he got to me he proceeded to tell me how terrible the sermon was, how wrong I was and that he would probably never be at worship again. As he left the man standing beside me leaned over and said, "I thought it was one of the best messages you have ever given. I don't know what my son thought you said." Both had heard the same message and each had heard or interpreted what I said differently. This is a constant reminder to me that no matter how well I choose my words I cannot control how they are heard.

What was John hearing?

John's vision continues with John seeing another worship experience in heaven. If we go back to verse 9 we read, "*And I heard...*" Those gathered in heaven are now singing a new song of worship and praise to God. New things are now happening; there are new expectations of God. God's kingdom is now being realized. Could, I repeat, could John be talking about a present reality rather than a future promise? The Church in John's day is experiencing growth even during a time of persecution. John is not on Patmos for a vacation, he is there in exile because of his faith. And yet, the message of Christ is being told to more and more people and they are hearing and accepting the message. This is a time of celebration and praise regardless of the "temporary" situation of persecution. The Church is growing.

John hears singing. Remember the story of the Prodigal? The elder son comes home from the field after a long day of watching the field hands work. He does not know his younger brother has come home. According to Luke, "... *he heard the music and the dancing*" (15:25b NIV). Something is happening at the house and these are not the usual sounds that greet him as he returns. The Psalmist says in 30:4 "*Sing praises to the Lord.*"

John is allowed to see and hear what is happening in heaven. It is a new vision for John and the people, "*Saints from every tribe and language and people and nation*" (9b). There is no one for whom the Lamb did not die. Worship is inclusive in heaven. This image would be one that would be and is hard for many people to understand. They see/saw heaven as an exclusive community. A community reserved for them and for those who are like them. But John's vision is one of an inclusive community of "*every tribe and language and people and nation.*" God's mandate to the Church was to go into ALL the world. The vision given is one of a global community of saints where all voices are raised in celebration and praise. "*Then I heard...*"

What do you hear? What do we hear? Going back to my opening illustration, we don't always hear the same thing. We often filter the words we hear to fit our situation. What we hear is not always easy to discern. What parent has appreciated the music of their children? How many sermons were preached against "rock and roll", the Beatles or Elvis? And now the beat and style of their music is used in songs and hymns used in worship. Martin Luther would often take the tunes of tavern songs and put Christian words to them and use them in worship. His thinking was that people would be more apt to sing familiar tunes and used them with new words. Today you can go to jazz worship services or find hard rock Christian songs.

We hear things filtered through our experiences. Recall a story of a New York City native and a Native American walking down one of the major avenues of the New York City. As they are walking the Native American stops and listen. When asked what he is listening to he responds, "a bird singing." The NYC native asks, "How can you hear a bird singing amid all this traffic and people noises?" The Native American takes a quarter from his pocket and drops it on the sidewalk. Immediately many of those walking by stop and start looking for where they hear the coin drop. "We hear what we are listening for," responds the Native American.

Maybe we should change the question to, “What are we listening for?” Are we listening to hear our thoughts and ideas confirmed? Are we listening to have our thoughts and ideas challenged? (Many times people have asked why I am reading a certain book. It does not fit in with their theology. I respond that I often read authors that I may not agree with to expand my thinking and thoughts. It often forces me to understand and articulate my own position better). Do we listen to what God may actually be saying to us and to his church? How do we listen?

Remember this is a new image for John and for most of the world of his day. John is familiar with the Temple and its design for worship. There is the Court of the Gentiles to which all are welcome. Then there is the Court of the Women where only those of Israel or converts are welcome. Then there is the Court of Israel where only the men are allowed to enter. From there is the Holy Place where only the High Priest is able to enter and then only once a year. Each movement is more and more restrictive as to who may or who may not enter. John’s vision is one of a place that is holier than the Holy of Holies – heaven. And who is there? People of every tribe, nation, people and language. John hears God being praised in every language and dialect. This is not the restrictive image one would have expected.

The restrictions are no longer in place. As we have said, worship is now inclusive. And yet there are still those who cannot quite grasp John’s vision. There are still those who would rather exclude and include. The vision and message John gives to a vital and growing Church is one of heavenly worship where there are no restrictions and voices are heard in every language and tongue. It is John’s call and affirmation of Christ to God into all the world.

C.S. Lewis in the last book of his Narnia series, *The Last Battle*, describes a view of the entrance to Paradise. The entrance is through a stable door. As more and more are added and the group grows larger and larger attention is drawn to a group of Dwarfs who are sitting in one corner of the stable. They are sitting in a circle and are convinced that they are in a dark, smelly stable. The soft-hearted Lucy begs Aslan to do something.

“Aslan,” said Lucy through her tears, “could you—will you—do something for these poor Dwarfs?”

“Dearest,” said Aslan, “I will show you both what I can and cannot do.” He came close to the Dwarfs and gave a long growl: low, but it set all the air shaking. But the Dwarfs said to one another, “Hear that? That’s the gang at the other end of the Stable trying to frighten us. They do it with a machine of some kind. Don’t take any notice. They won’t take us in again.” (Aslan then goes on to put a banquet before the Dwarfs but all they taste is straw and stable fodder. They are convinced the food is poisoned and they refuse to have any part in it.)

“You see,” said Aslan, “They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out.”

What do we hear?

---

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989  
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989  
Lewis, C.S., The Last Battle, Collier Books, 1970 (1956),