

"ITCHING EARS"



Our ears itch to hear news of destruction and tragedy, often drowning out the good news from God who made heaven and earth.

Scripture:

Psalm 121

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills — where does my help come from? ²My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. ³He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; ⁴indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. ⁵The LORD watches over you — the LORD is your shade at your right hand; ⁶the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. ⁷The LORD will keep you from all harm —he will watch over your life; ⁸the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

¹In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ²Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.



Our guest preacher was the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Young, who is now an instructor of Systematic Theology at Jakarta Theological Seminary in Indonesia while continuing to work with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. On a more personal note, she is also the daughter of the Rev. Phil and the Rev. Betty Jean Young whom we also welcome. Betty Jean was an interim-pastor here at Church of the Roses a few years ago.

ITCHING EARS

I'll never forget something that happened about twenty years ago. I had been living in Indonesia for three years, so I was far from the madding crowd. It was those blessed days before there was internet, remember? There were hardly any cable news networks. So living in Indonesia in a very remote place, I didn't hear much news. I didn't hear many of the things that were going on in the U.S. After three years there, I came back. In fact, at the time, my parents were living in Marinwood, so I came to Marinwood. My mother, being forever my mother, sent me to the market for groceries.

At first I was a little scared because I had to drive on the right side of the road instead on the left like it is in Indonesia. This was the first grocery store that I had seen in three years, and it was a big shock – all the abundance of food and the variety and the choices. It was overwhelming.

ADVERTISING AND FEAR

But then, standing in the checkout line, I remember being really surprised because there were some really nice wholesome magazines there. If you remember back to twenty years ago, there was *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Family*

Circle, Parents. Remember when those were the main magazines on the racks? But even those good magazines had titles to articles about things like: Is Your Water Safe? What's Happening to Your Children at School? Can Your Hair-coloring Cause Cancer? All these things that were building up fear!

And I realized that for three years I had been far from advertising in America. I hadn't had that kind of fear being thrown at me in order to get me to buy this magazine or buy that product.

That night on the news, the newsman said, "Stay tuned for these commercial messages and when you come back we're going to tell you about this poisonous gas that could be leaking into your basement." (Remember when we all had to buy radon detectors because we were all frightened about poisonous gas.) It was a way to keep us tuned in, and I understand that they tell us these scary things so that we'll keep buying those products and buying those magazines and watching these news shows.

But I realized that by living outside of this, I hadn't been exposed to that, so it came as a shock to come back to the U.S. and see how much fear is used to keep us as consumers.

FEAR IS SPREADING

I also want to say that it is now twenty years later, and yes, in Indonesia now we have the internet and I even have cable news in my own apartment – I get CNN. I don't pay for it though – don't worry. It just comes free. So I do see the news now, and I will be honest with you, it concerns me, because it feels like the fear has spread. It is no longer just advertising to get us to buy products, but it's also fear about our government – about taxes, even about our president. Scary things are propagated about what's going on, and it worries me.

What fascinates me and scares me is that I feel like it is getting worse. We as Americans are living in a lot of fear to the point that we are even scared of the outside world. We're putting up both spiritual and physical walls to keep out that scary outside world. It's almost like the writer of 2 Timothy predicted the internet two-thousand years ago. Because did you notice how the author says that people will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires. I would say 'accumulate internet pages, websites or news channels to suit their own desires.'

EFFECT OF THE INTERNET

I don't know if you have heard this, but sadly, I read a study recently about the effect of the internet now in the United States. Overseas, developing areas that are just learning about democracy are actually helped by the internet because they get introduced to new ideas.

But sadly, here in the U.S., it turns out the internet is actually dividing us and building up fear.

People who are of one persuasion only look at web-pages that agree with them, just like the writer to Timothy said, 'that suits their own desires.'

People of any certain persuasion or walk of life only look at news that suits their desires and they get more to the extreme in that position and they get more firmly grounded in that position. Whatever your position is, you get more of that by only hearing news that suits your own desires as we were warned by the author of 2 Timothy two-thousand years ago.

It fascinates me because here, what the letter to 2 Timothy reminds us is that we should not get caught up in that. We have *good* news. We know the *good* news of Jesus Christ, the *good* news of God's love at work in this world. That love is so much bigger than all the evil that we hear about in our media and in the gossip and rumor-mongering and fear mongering that I feel has built up in our culture to an overwhelming pitch.

GOODNESS

So that's why I'm very happy to say that I am your Mission Co-Worker who has come here today to bring you really *good* news. One of the things that is great about Sunday is that we can turn off our televisions, shut down the computer and instead come here to listen to some *good* news.

I want to tell you some things you probably don't know about the world, but I hope you will share with your neighbors. It worries me sometimes when people hear that I live in Indonesia and they are scared for me. They think, oh no, you poor thing; it must be so dangerous. I'm here to tell you that as much as I would love your pity, thinking of

me, the suffering Mission Worker, actually, it's a very good life.

DIVERSITY IN INDONESIA

Here's a fascinating thing to know about Indonesia. Whatever you may think about it, here's one that will probably surprise you. It is true that Indonesia is the fourth largest country in the world – China, India, United States, and then Indonesia with two-hundred-forty-five million people. But here's a fun-fact for you to know that I think is some good news you won't hear through the media. It's the fourth largest Hindu country in the world. India is first, then Bangladesh, Nepal and then Indonesia which has five million Hindus. These are Hindus living all throughout Indonesia, living in peace and harmony with their neighbors who might be Buddhist or Muslim or Christian. On the island of Bali itself there are about four million Hindus.

I'll do a little bit of advertising myself. I'd invite any of you to come and visit me and I can take you to see this little island of Bali which you can drive around in about five or six hours. It is not that much bigger than the Bay Area.

As well as the Hindus, there are also thriving communities of Muslims and of Christians. In fact, (this is the advertisement part) the Christian church of Bali runs a resort in the major tourist area, right on the beach in Bali. So if you'd like to come and get a Hindu massage or hear a mosque call to prayer while staying in a Christian hotel, you can do that all right in the heart of Bali.

PEOPLE LIVING IN PEACE

I think that's good news, and in a way it is kind of boring and you're not going to hear it in the media. But I'm here to tell you that I believe that's the way that God is working in this world, in a good way through people living in peace.

THIRTY-MILLION CHRISTIANS

Another thing to tell you about is that there are lots of Christians in Indonesia. This always surprises people, but I learned this from the Moderator of the General Assembly whose name I can never remember. He was Moderator in 2004. He came to Indonesia and he said, "I'm coming here because you have the largest population of Reformed Christians in the whole world. Who knew? There are more Presbyterians in Indonesia than in any other country. Isn't that great! I'm

surrounded by people who worship God just like I do. They sit, like very good Calvinists, never clap and look forward and have very serious worship services and think about their guilt. They are good Calvinists in Indonesia – lots of them. So I feel very much at home.

There are eleven-million Reformed Christians and part of the thirty-million Christians total that live in Indonesia. Thirty million! I am asked if I teach at the only seminary. There are two-hundred-fifty Christian seminaries in Indonesia. Many of them are in the city of Jakarta because they have to provide pastors for the thirty million people who worship Jesus Christ. So it's actually a very lively place to be a Christian.

PEACE LOVING MUSLIMS

Now what you have probably also heard is, of course, what Indonesia is known for is that it has the largest Muslim population in the world. That is true, and I'm glad that people know that about Indonesia.

In fact I live right there with one-hundred-ninety-six million Muslims. That's more than the entire Middle East put together.

The reason I want to tell you this good news is that the Muslims of Indonesia are peace-loving, God-fearing people.

Are there exceptions? Of course; there are some Muslims that are influenced by evil and do evil things. Just as there are Buddhists that do evil things to their neighbors, there are Hindus that do, there are Christians that do. Ninety-nine percent of the people of Indonesia are good people who don't want militant Islam to enter into Indonesia and are doing their best to stop it. But once again, that doesn't get in the news. What gets in the news are the very few exceptions that make the problems and the tragedy and destruction.

This is where I think it is interesting about the "itching ears." It's almost like we want to hear only about tragedy and destruction. You only hear about the Muslims who participate in evil acts. You don't hear that there are one-hundred-ninety-six million Muslims who want to live in peace. That doesn't show up on the nightly news, but that's why I'm

here to tell it to you so that you can tell it to the people that you know.

We as Christians can be bringing good news to our brothers and sisters about our Muslim brothers and sisters whom we should support as they strive to live in peace in this world as well.

EVIL IN THE WORLD

Again, I'm not a Pollyanna. Am I trying to say there is no evil at all in this world? Of course not. We as Christians also are very serious about the evil in this world. We know that when God, God's self came to this world, we killed God. Yes, because Jesus was preaching a message of peace and justice and love, people crucified him. He brought good news that scared the people who wanted to keep everyone afraid and keep everyone down. But we remember that that's not the last word. On the third day, Jesus rose again from the dead, and that's the good news that doesn't make it into the headlines, but we as Christians believe and are encouraged to spread to the world.

DEVASTATION

So I want to tell you one final story that has always moved me, that really struck me. I learned it from the Acehese people themselves. The Acehese are 99.9% Muslim. They are a province of Indonesia, of about five million people. They are on the northern end of the island of Sumatra. As your itching ears heard in the news, almost six years ago, on December 26, 2004, there was a wave fifty feet high going five-hundred miles an hour that slammed into the coastline and killed two-hundred-thousand people. We can't even wrap our heads around that kind of destruction.

But what we also need to know that didn't make the headlines is that in Aceh, for twenty-five years before that, there had been an on-going civil war with horrible human rights abuses. The military was treating the people horribly. The rebellion movement was killing people that they suspected of supporting the Indonesian military. It was so bad that the Indonesian government had cut off the province of Aceh from the rest of the world. No one knew what was going on because they didn't let reporters in, they didn't let tourists in; no one was allowed in. And yet, the wave that hit on December

26, was an equal opportunity disaster. It killed everybody. It killed soldiers, it killed members of the rebellion movement, it killed the Indonesian government workers who had come to administrate that province, as well as killing the Acehese people themselves.

AND THEN A MIRACLE

What happened, miraculously, the next day is that everybody participated, side by side in the clean up. The soldiers, who had come with automatic weapons, put down those weapons. They picked up shovels and started doing the clean up, bagging the corpses who had been dragged far from where they had lived and had been totally destroyed in the tumbling of the wave. It was the soldiers who the day before had been oppressing the Acehese people who literally "turned their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." They used shovels to clean up the corpses and put them into mass graves on behalf of the Acehese people.

And then they signed a peace treaty a few months later and the day after the peace treaty, they had ceremonies where they cut their weapons in half – their rifles were broken in half – in the public eye so that everyone knew that the war was over. In the six years since then, not a single shot has been fired. The military has backed out, and the rebellion movement leaders are now running for office, democratically elected, in the province of Aceh.

In the midst of suffering and destruction, God has brought peace and justice to the people of Aceh. Why that doesn't get in the news, I can't tell you. Maybe because of the itching ears of the public; we want to hear the bad instead of the good. But I know that we, as Christians, know the good news, that with the tsunami survivors we can look up to the hills and say, "From whence does my help come? My help comes from God who made heaven and earth."

That is good news worth sharing! Alleluia! Amen.



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October 17, 2010**