

Hearing Voices

Do you hear voices sometimes? Not in the dangerous, unhealthy, and even perhaps psychotic ways that psychiatrists warn us about. But I suspect some of you hear voices every day. For example, do you hear the voice of Susan Bennet? Susan Bennet is the actress whose voice was recorded for the iPhone assistant Siri. Do you ever hear the voice of Karen Jacobsen? She's likely the voice you hear that gives you directions if you use your car or phone GPS. This past week I was introduced to Alexa, a computer generated voice activated digital assistant, when we installed our Echo device. I can now ask to Alexa to play selections of Motown music or Jane can request Johann Sebastian Bach. Truth is we hear a lot of voices each day; even when we are by ourselves. But this morning I invite you to think a little about the voices you hear each day. Not just when we are in conversation, not just our virtual digital assistants, but in the media and even our self-talk, when we are alone.

The voices we listen to matter. They shape our thoughts and lives, influence our opinions and impact our mental health. Even our self-talk is important. Research has shown again and again that the voices we listen to matter. Words matter deeply. The voices we hear, even our own self talk shape how we see ourselves, how we live and how we work with others.

But this morning I invite you to reflect upon the voices we hear. What internal voices shape your living? What internal voices help you define yourself and your life choices?

We learned again this past week, just how dangerous words and voices can be. In a world of pandemic surges, racial unrest and political divisiveness, words have dangerous power; power to incite rage and violence, power to stir hatred and suspicion, power to divide and disrupt. Voices, regardless of their political persuasion, that call for violence, revenge, hatred and undermining lawful government are not of God. Listening to such voices is dangerous and destructive. To what voices are you listening?

Our Bible readings this morning would urge us to listen carefully for God's voice and what God is saying about our lives and our living. Our readings this morning speak about and focus upon God's voice. Our OT reading from Genesis reminds us of how God's voice brings creation to life. God speaks and things happen. Our Psalm also reminds us of the power of God's voice. And lastly Our Gospel lesson this morning reminds us that at the baptism of Jesus God spoke and the voice from heaven said, "This is my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Jesus was obviously influenced deeply by the voice he heard that day at the Jordan river.

Is God's voice one of primary the voices to which you listen? Does God's voice shape your life, your actions, your politics, your self-talk?

Is your spiritual Bluetooth connected? Each time I get in my car; if I have my cell phone with me, my car's sound system immediately connects my phone to the car speakers using technology called Bluetooth. Did you know that that term, Bluetooth" comes from the name of a Danish king Bluetooth II, famous for uniting various communities in Denmark, hence Bluetooth is technology that unites of syncs signals, devices and people.

Wouldn't it be great if we had a kind of spiritual Bluetooth which automatically kept us connected to God?

Wouldn't it be great to have a Bluetooth filter so we could know what voices are of God?

What voices do you listen to that shape who you are and how you live? Are you listening to the powerful voice of God?

Joseph Stowell, author of the book Simply Jesus asked Billy Graham what had been the best experience of his entire ministry. He had preached in front of millions of people, traveled around the world many times, counseled presidents and kings. But listen to what Billy Graham said, "By far the greatest joy of my life has been my fellowship with Jesus. Hearing Him speak to me, having Him guide me, sensing His presence with me and His power through me. This has been the highest pleasure of my life!" Are you connected? Are you listening for God's voice?

It's still early in the New Year. What about a resolution to hear God's voice more...to listen for God talk? to pray more? To read the scriptures more regularly? To worship more frequently? It could impact our living deeply in 2021.

Secondly, whose voice tells you who you are? I have shared this before but I remember distinctly, 38 years ago, when Jane and I were in the hospital labor and delivery room and our daughter Jennifer was born, the first words that she had spoken to her were "Jennifer Dianne Elliott, we love you!"

In much the same way, look again at the story of the baptism of Jesus, after being baptized by John, Jesus emerges from the water and hears the voice of God, "this is my son the beloved, in whom I am well pleased" When it comes to your life, your identity, your purpose; to whose voice are you listening? Certainly the voices of spouses, children and family are crucial; our own self talk matters, for many they live daily by words uttered by their mother or father... but do you hear God's voice as well. In Baptism God says to us "you are loved. You are my child. You are my son, my daughter."

But it's deeper than that. That person across the aisle politically is also God's child. The voices of those who disagree are also children of God. Our faith calls us to recognize creator's handiwork even in the lives of those with whom we share strong disagreement. Conflict is a call to discussion and patient dialogue not violence and hatred.

Jane and I have watched the show on television called "The Crown" it is a history based series about the life of Queen Elizabeth. As we have watched the show I have been struck over and over by how deeply rooted Queen Elizabeth's sense of self is. Despite her critics, despite those who attack, despite those who mock; she remains clear on her identity, her values and her calling. Is it any different for you and me as children of a heavenly king; heirs to a kingdom?

Make no mistake, Jesus first words of his public ministry were words that call us to repentance. Words that call us to take an honest sober, look at the picture we see in life's mirror. This week that is true for us as people and us as a nation. This is a time for deep honest self assessment, for soul searching. True renewal and true transformation for ourselves and for our nation, cannot occur without honest acknowledgment of our brokenness, weakness and yes, sin. Can we listen for the voice of God that speaks truthfully about our lives, our nation and our world?

It is so easy in life to listen to the destructive voices, the critical voices, the voices that tear down and deflate. Make sure you include the voice of God from your baptism in your internal self-talk. You are loved. You are valued. You are worthy. You are God's child. A son or daughter of God.

Lastly, allow God's voice to shape how you live. In the act of affirming Jesus...This is my son, the beloved...God also was equipping

Henri Nouwen puts it this ways...the affirmation equips Jesus for the brokenness to come

Equips him to embrace the brokenness of this world to endure it

Ultimately to give himself away for the sake of others

Pattern for Christian living...affirmed broken given

Directly connects to our ministry in daily life...affirmed, broken...given for others

In much the same way, in Baptism you and I are gifted by God's spirit, empowered by God's power and sent forth to serve. The Baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of an intense period of ministry and service.

Is it any different for you and me? For our nation, for our world? Isn't God calling us in baptism to use the force of love and service with wisdom and strength? To build up? To serve? To help those in critical need?

Are you listening to God's voice? Is God's voice shaping your identity, your living? Your purpose?