

Fifth Sunday in Lent
JEREMIAH 21:4-9
PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22
HEBREWS 2:1-10
JOHN 3:14-21
March 17, 2024

The Voice!

The voice! What was it like? What did it sound like? How was it heard, perceived? How did it feel? What did it feel like to hear whatever they were hearing, whatever they thought they heard? The voice! What emotions did it elicit from the unexpected hearers as they listened intently to what was either a crack of thunder or the thunderous voice of God? The voice! Was it a deep base voice, the kind that movies traditionally associate with the voice of God, perhaps with a purely refined resonance like George Beverly Shea or Tennessee Ernie Ford back in the day, or perhaps more of the unmistakable sound of world-renowned tenor Luciano Pavarotti? Was it a soft and subtle voice, barely audible, barely above a whisper, and yet clear as a bell, ironically, perhaps ringing like the apostle Paul's noisy gong or clanging symbols, loudly reverberating with a resounding echo that grabbed everyone's attention? Or was it a feminine voice, the Holy One sounding forth wisdom, conjuring up the mystical Spirit of Sophia, "sophia" being the Greek word for wisdom, an image of the Holy that dates from at least as far back as the compiling of the wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible, richest prose, beautiful poetry, including the wondrous book of Proverbs, literary masterpieces that by design stimulate the senses then and now? Or was there no voice at all, but in the sound of sheer silence the word of God transmitted with crystal clarity, a similar but very different version of the way the divine message would soon be conveyed to all those cultural representatives who would gather at Pentecost in the not-so-distant future?

The voice! The writer of the Gospel of John tells the reader then and now, that even with its clarity there was confusion, nothing new when it comes to sensing the voice! Some said it was thunder, an understandable response. After all, the Hebrew Bible often portrays the presence of God in nature, revealed in earthquakes and storms and raging seas, the violence of mother nature pointing

toward something beyond the obvious. Others said that “an angel spoke to him,” with no further explanation given, perhaps nothing more necessary. As Christine Valters Painter notes in an interview by David Dault, “First of all, angels, saints, and ancestors are real presences that are not visible to us in our linear, rational mind. They exist in this threshold of space, what’s known as a liminal space in the Celtic imagination.”¹ I had to get a little Irish in this sermon! “But this force of love,” says Painter, “grounded in divine love, is available to us, and actively cultivating it through intuitive practices can help to give us that sense of support and belonging and care and kinship and all of those beautiful gifts that I think most of us are longing for, even if we’re not completely aware of it.”² Yes, Jesus was aware, whatever being aware was and still is! The Johannine writer gives us just enough information to pique our interest, to stir our curiosity, to raise questions of the most profound meaning, inquiries of eternal import, welling from deep within our spirits, deep down in our souls. The writer of the Gospel of John gives us that and nothing more!

The voice! Conspicuous in various texts in the Gospels, we read in places where suddenly, seemingly as if out of nowhere, a voice from above, a voice from the clouds, reverberates over a startled audience. As I read the Gospel lection from John for today, once again encountering the mysterious, mystical, voice, it got me to thinking about all the places in these narratives describing the amazing life of Jesus, scriptural references where we encounter what the writer desperately wants us readers to associate with, to realize is the voice of the Holy One. All this conjecture got me to thinking. The presence of the sounds described in these textual gems of ominous auditory awakening, eliciting both delight and dread, tells me that the writer was and is trying to get us to take notice, to slow down in our reading, to pause and take notice, to pay close attention, because there is something at work here that not only demands our rapt attentiveness but is calling us to a closer examination about exactly what was, and thus is, transpiring in the text, that perhaps there is more to the narrative in question than meets the eye, that there is something big already taking place or about to happen. Think about these inflection points where we read about the voice. The

¹David Dault, “Our Unseen Companions,” interview of Christine Valters Painter in *The Christian Century*, vol. 141, No. 4, Peter W. Marty, editor, 56.

²Ibid.

voice appears in various texts, including Jesus' baptism, Jesus' transfiguration, and the pivotal text we read today. Yes, our Gospel reading for today offers us a bellwether moment when Jesus announces for all to hear that the time has come, the time is nigh, time to go to the cross and die an ugly death. It was perhaps another suspended moment frozen in time, but here a major pivot, and a word for those who were within earshot that this was their shot as well, it was their time, high time, that they jumped ship or that they get on board and follow in his footsteps, carrying their cross as they go. After all, "Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever!" And then, not just a voice, but the voice!

The voice! Our quest is what we people of faith do, not just people of Christian faith, but people of any and every faith, the longing for a glimpse or grasp of the Holy in whatever sensory awareness that rarified air of transcendent experience might be manifest, the essence of what amounts to existential awe and wonder. As people who believe, as people who believe that there is a something of life-giving substance other than our own limited, unlimited, selves, who sense, who trust, that there is a Great Spirit of the Universe, a Ground of All Being, a Holy Other, numinous, Spirit, including any other human-made inadequate adjective that seeks to describe holiness, God-essence, God-presence, yes, whatever God is. O what we would do to have even the slightest hint, the faintest touch of that kind of touch, at the surface or even at in the recesses of our being still and knowing. Diana Butler Bass asks in her book *Grounded*, "Where is God?" She then declares that this question ". . . is one of the most consequential questions of our times. People believe, but the believe differently than they once did. The theological ground is moving; a spiritual revolution is afoot." She cites Wendell Berry who proclaims that "what we need is here!" Episcopal priest and spiritual director Heidi Haverkamp reflects on the difference between our knowing and our belief, our faith. She says, "While the word *know* used to mean 'to be acquainted with' or 'to perceive' in modern usage the emphasis has shifted toward having information about something or practical knowledge of it. The word now implies a sense of clarity and understanding that leaves less room for curiosity or mystery. What can we 'know' about God, really? 'Si comprehendus, non est Deus,' said Augustine: if you understand, it is not God. The word *know* is related to the Old High German word *bichnāan*, to recognize. 'Recognizing' God sounds less poetic

but makes a humbler confession that ‘knowing’ in our modern sense.” She adds, “Of course, what makes faith *faith* is not that we can claim to know or have comprehended God. Faith does not entail a search for information or receiving clear answers to life’s persistent questions, although churches and Christians try with things like ‘Bible truths,’ catechisms, creeds, and books upon books. I wonder if we often make what we think we know about God into an idol. When Job wonders why all those awful things happened to him, God does not offer an answer. God tells him that he is unable to know.”³ Finally, she admits that “To say ‘I don’t know’ as a prayer, confession, or meditation is not to give up but to witness to the gap of unknowing between us and God. A gap not of cold emptiness but of wonder; a gap where there is more space for relating to one another and a clearing for the path that leads us back again to the mystery and glory of God. Jesus does not ask his disciples to know or explain much. He asks them to do things, mostly very slow-moving things: to listen, to pray, to see, to love, to follow, and to serve the people around them. He leaves them (and us) with teachings and parables that do not give much in the way of clear answers but are more like spiritual puzzles or invitations to start thinking and talking together. Less like a beautiful, all-inclusive buffet, more like a do-it-yourself potluck.”⁴ Very well said! My sentiments exactly! Scott Hagley and Karen Rohrer note that “In his commentary on Acts, theologian Willie Jennings reflects on the scene where the resurrected Christ lounges at the table with his disciples and demonstrates the truth of his resurrection from the dead. Jesus presents himself to be touched. He shares in the physicality of the creature by sharing food and conversation around a table. Perhaps the church, Jennings says, also exists to be touched by the world. We are not set apart from the world, a theological tax-exempt status, but rather set apart for the world. The church is a sign of and witness to God’s new creation precisely in its ordinariness. Here is a people among us, who share in our creaturely and cultural limitations and who are touched by God; here is a community whose existence demonstrates the broad possibilities of God’s grace.”⁵

The voice! I am reminded of the story of the great prophet Elijah as he attempted to flee for his life from the wrath of the hussy Jezebel after having brutally

³Ibid, Heidi Haverkamp, 65.

⁴Ibid., 65.

⁵Ibid., Scott Hagley; Karen Rohrer, 43.

overseeing the slaughter of all the prophets of Baal gathered at Mt. Carmel in that epic showdown by the brook Kishon (I Kings 18:20-41). Hunted like a wounded animal, Elijah desperately retreating while on the run, fueled by fear, fearing for his life, driven by the nagging belief that he had been abandoned by the God he had served and whose honor he had fought to protect. The story is told that he went a day's journey into the wilderness until he came and sat down under a solitary broom tree, asking that he might be delivered by death. He fell into a deep sleep and when he awakened, he was startled by the voice of an angel telling him to eat food mysteriously provided in that sacred moment. A voice came again a second time telling him to eat once more, holy food that would sustain him on the journey because he must continue. He came to a cave where once again he heard the voice, the prophet lamenting what he presumed was the absence of any semblance of God. It was a woe is me moment! And the word came out of nowhere once more, "Go and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." The writer of I Kings tells the reader that "there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind! And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake! And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire! And after the fire a sound of sheer silence!" It was a Simon and Garfunkel moment! And when Elijah heard it, yes, clearly voiced in the sound of sheer silence, indeed, the prophet heard the voice. Approaching the entrance to his hideaway Elijah knew he had heard the voice, yes, the voice of silence, the voice of God! (I Kings 19:1-18).

The voice! There are so many biblical stories abounding in descriptions of the presence of God, each one unique and yet similar, the same, many conveyed in graphic, vivid, technicolor, terms, a cinematographer's dream, all the tumultuous sights and sounds of nature, each hospitable and hostile event understood to be the very expressions of holiness unleashed upon the world. And yet in this story, telling in greatest detail the adventurous escapades of one prophet, the writer sought to convey a not-so-subtle message and that word is the subtlety of God-speak amidst our human being and doing. I have no doubt that the voice comes to us daily in myriad ways, more audible manifestations than we could ever imagine, but so easily missed amidst our busy and harried, frantically driven lives with all their proverbial hustle and bustle that consume us. So perhaps the solution, or at

least a part of the solution, is not to lower our expectations, our hopes and dreams, but to adjust them, to change them a bit, yes, to recalibrate and retrofit, to embrace reality as we find it in our contemporary context. The imaginative minds of ancient, biblical, peoples, were flavored, shall we say influenced, by their naively prescientific understanding of the universe, which for them, was as explainable as what they perceived as transpiring right in front of their faces. In all our considerations, our discoveries, we understand the universe to be far more complex than what we see, far more complicated than simplistic answers will provide. **I am convinced that God is just as real now as God was then and that God is still speaking now, cheap denominational slogan inserted here, just as God presumably, reportedly, spoke in diverse manners back in the biblical day of once upon a time. It is all a matter of perspective, a matter of perception, plain and simple, then and now.**

The voice! Another interesting, yes, intriguing, aspect of our Gospel lection from John for today is that this booming, perhaps more subtle, voice of God followed what might be described as a rather routine, ordinary, part of the narrative, a simple story about some Greeks, yes, Gentiles, no doubt gentile proselytes to Judaism. They had come to the Passover festival to worship. Seeing Philip, interesting that it was Philip, based on the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, a Gentile, they immediately approached this disciple among disciples and made a humble, perhaps daunting, request. They inquired, “Sir we want to see Jesus!” Obviously overhearing the request, Jesus went into one of his many Johannine monologues, one of the numerous theological soliloquies found in the Gospel of John, a sermonette that ended with a call to his would-be followers that they embrace what was, and still should be, the ultimate act of discipleship, to be willing to die for the cause. It was this call that preceded the voice we have discussed today. I think this is more than textual coincidence, the order not by accident, but a significant link in the text. I think this proximity, this arrangement, is noteworthy in that the call, perhaps ironically, precedes the voice and not vice versa, that in the giving of ourselves, perhaps even ultimately so in the rare giving of our lives, is when we are most vulnerable, compromised in a most glorious way, fully exposed, open to hearing the still small, yes, the subtle, sotto voce, hushed and covered, the whispered tones echoing the aura of the still speaking voice, the boisterous and booming, the deafening voice of the

One wrapped in awe and mystery, transcendence far exceeding, a sound far beyond the ordinary, the routine, the everyday. The irony is that it is the ordinary, the routine, the everyday where we unavoidably always find ourselves, the place where we potentially hear the voice. Catch 22, I guess!

The sight! So, back to those Greeks and their request to see Jesus, another subtle reminder of the radical hospitality, the expansive inclusiveness, the “extravagant welcome”, the open vulnerability, that is always on display, always lurking in and between the lines of all the biblical texts, Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures alike, the biblical narrative an exclusionary no-fly zone. While it may be beyond our limits, yes, impossible to hear a literally audible voice of God, it is never beyond our grasp to see Jesus for we see Jesus in every hurting human being who walks this earth. We see Jesus as we travel this sacred sod that God has hospitably created for every walk of life, plant and animal, including the human ones. Seeing Jesus is not so difficult, not at all beyond our grasp and our comprehension, because he is always in view, his appearance always coming into focus. Jesus is everywhere because the Spirit of Christ, unleashed after his death and resurrection and ascension, is everywhere and thus readily available. When we see the faces of those who live on the fringes, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and marginalized who live on the edges of our manufactured and reinforced societal sidelines, we see more than an image, but the very face of Christ, yes, we see the face of God. And yes, we see the face of Christ, the very face of God, whenever we look one another in the eye. We see God in the frustration and pain, the hurt and dis-ease in the abuse and violence, the bias and prejudice, and we see God in the joy and celebration, in the gratitude and generosity, in the abundance and affluence, what one movie title called “Affluenza,” possessions galore, things and experiences, that many of us are so incredibly lucky to have and to hold. And yes, the face of Christ, the face of God, is on all those who are richly endowed as well. Yes, there are those in the world who embrace evil, their wickedness belying their creator, but their horrors and atrocities must be left for another day. The voice of God? Good luck with that! The face of God? The face of God in Christ is on every face, faces all around us, just waiting to be noticed! As one Irish blessing, taken from Saint Patrick’s Breastplate, says, “Christ be with me; Christ before me; Christ behind me; Christ in me; Christ beneath me; Christ above me; Christ on my right; Christ on my left;

Christ where I lie; Christ where I sit; Christ when I arise; Christ in the heart of every (one) who thinks of me; Christ in the mouth of every (one) who speaks of me; Christ in every eye that sees me; Christ in every ear that hears me; Salvation is of the Lord!”

So, “May God give you . . . for every storm, a rainbow, for every tear, a smile, for every care, a promise, and a blessing in each trial. For every problem life sends, a faithful friend to share, for every sigh, a sweet song, and an answer for each prayer!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, whose voice is our voice, whose hands and feet are our hands and feet, as we follow the call to the cross that looms larger and larger before us! Amen and amen!