

The Voice of God

Acts 9 :36-43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9-17

John 10:22-30 (courtesy Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

10:22 At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter,

10:23 and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon.

10:24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

10:25 Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me;

10:26 but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.

10:27 My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.

10:28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

10:29 What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.

10:30 The Father and I are one."

Believe it or not, our lesson for today is related to last December 2nd! Last December 2nd was Hanukkah. And that is what is meant in our Gospel lesson, in the first sentence, when it says, "the festival of the Dedication". According to Wikipedia, "From the Hebrew word for "dedication" or "consecration", Hanukkah marks the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem (Second Temple) after its desecration by the forces of the King of Syria Antiochus IV."

So we need to keep this in mind when we listen to the text, because everyone there hearing him, would see Jesus' words in relationship to the religious calendar year. It would be like someone preaching on Christmas Eve about something - we would all hear it and immediately interpret it within the context of the birth of Christ. The hearers of the text had in their minds clearly the meaning of Hanukkah - the day that the power of the kings and power of the Temple had been restored.

So this new and exciting Rabbi comes on this scene, walks through the portico of the great King Solomon, the Jews gather around for a sermon based on the restoration of their religious power - hopeful about a restoration of their *political* power, and beg him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly," and this guy is stuck between a rock and a hard place. If he says yes he is - then *in the context of the day*, they would be lead in the wrong direction about the Kingdom of God that *he* was to reign in. If he says, "no", he would be lying.

How does he communicate the truth, in the context of Hanukkah? He says, basically, that they have the evidence in front of them - they only needed to trust *him* and **their own observations**. But they don't - they don't believe in what they witness or in their own senses because they have stopped listening to that still small voice inside which keeps them in touch with God - and, by the way, that which keeps them in touch with their own true natures.

Why? What has happened that they have stopped trusting that voice inside of them?

They have been living for so long in their heads - striving to outwit others, wishing for powers that have been denied them. They have been taught, **by humans that they trusted**, that they are to hope for a kind of Messiah that would restore their Temple, their Kingship, and their dominance in the world around them. They so want the empire of King Solomon to be returned to them!

They **knew** - they **saw**, they **sensed** Jesus' power - or they would not *even* be listening to him, let alone feeling in suspense and urging him to tell them straight out. They were just so confused and didn't know who to trust - their inner voices - or the politically oriented voices telling them otherwise. So in the end, they did **not** believe their own inner awareness - the voice of God - the honest truth inside of them.

They were waiting for a King to follow in Solomon's footsteps, but instead, this guy makes reference to a Shepherd. Now, the first King, David was a Shepherd, but they didn't want someone like him - they wanted the pomp and glamour of the symbolic Empire and Temple builder, Solomon. Solomon was slick and gorgeous - David was ruddy and rough. During Jesus' time, a Shepherd was socially the equivalent of a migrant worker. Theologian, Debra Dean Murphy wrote, "The Good Samaritan. The Good Shepherd. Those who are lowly, contemptible; those who are

discounted in a world of power and prestige: pay attention to these, the Gospel writers seem to say – *God is probably at work in their midst*. The Good Samaritan gives fully of himself to save a stranger. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Now the text that follows today’s Gospel goes on to a surprising response. John 10:31-33, “The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, ‘I have shown you many good works **from the Father**. For which of these are you going to stone me?’ The Jews answered, ‘It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.’

Jesus consistently showed himself to be doing only good works. His compassion is exactly what drew him to the listeners. Those miraculous acts of mercy, his loving teachings, his wisdom, all that is what made them think he just might be the savior, but once he shocked them into reality – that he wasn’t going to be the kind of Messiah they were looking for – they were ready to stone him, for what? Getting their hopes up?

In the lectionary series the 4th Sunday in the Easter season is always Shepherd Sunday. This theme of Shepherd is one repeated aspect of our faith. The 23rd Psalm is the most memorized and beloved Psalm of all 150. King David was a Shepherd. Angels came to the Shepherds to tell them of the birth of the Messiah. From our Revelations text it reads, “for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd”. There are numerous references to the relationship between the Shepherd and the sheep throughout our Bible. The word Shepherd appears at least once in 118 verses of the Bible. And yet, they were social outcasts. What does this say about who is truly valued in *God’s* eyes?

Sheep were a valuable commodity. If you had sheep you had food, you had clothes, you had a source of income. Shepherds depended on the sheep for their livelihood. Sheep have a unique relationship with the shepherd. They are a *community* and they need someone to look out for them and care for them. They will not make it long on their own. They have to trust their shepherd. They are meek, so precious, and so vulnerable.

And in a way, Christ is asking humanity to become weak as sheep - to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Because it is only when we let our guard down, not live in our heads, **not** try to find power and win arguments – it is only when we can listen to our true feelings and pay great heed to those gentler merciful feelings that we can be fully followers of Christ.

In hearing and believing in those moments of awareness we hear Jesus’ voice. I believe it is in this Shepherd/Sheep analogy that we get a clue as to how we hear God’s voice. David Ewart, writes “The challenge for most mainline Christians is not following Jesus. We’ve been taught pretty well about that. The challenge for us is recognizing Jesus’ voice.”

We have so much in our Bible about who Jesus was, and we have heard reflections on Jesus in numerous books and poems and songs. We try to imagine in our daily choices, “What Would Jesus Do?” And yet, Jesus seems to many like just some literary figure, not real. We **can** feel the presence of God at times, through chance meetings, through inspirations, through answers to prayer, through the warm rush of the Holy Spirit, but Jesus is still more of a theory.

That is why for so many this final verse of our sermon text is so inspiring, “The Father and I are One”. Jesus lived on this earth. He taught, he healed, he performed miracles, including raising Lazarus from the dead. And he himself suffered an innocent’s death, and rose again. But all the time that he walked amongst the people he kept giving God the Glory – kept pointing at his Father as the source and the reason for his life. He was one with God then, and is one with God now. We learn from Jesus what kind of God we have - we have a God who speaks to us in such a way that we can only hear it if we are willing to trust the voice of our hearts and not the power struggles of our brains.

What happens when you can hear God’s voice? Then you become transformed – as **Peter** did when he came to Tabitha’s room and raised her from the dead. He was able to perform miracles. His life became a great witness to the truth about who God was, is and will be. The raising of Tabitha back from the dead is not the only miracle here – look what Peter did as a result of following Jesus!

Jesus got out of that potential stoning by saying the following, “‘Is it not written in your law, (and here Jesus quotes God) **“I said, you are gods”?** **If those to whom the word of God came were called “gods”** can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, “I am God’s Son”? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.’”

Jesus even gives God the credit for making all who hear his voice Gods. And those who hear God's voice have transforming power. Now this does not mean that today you can go to the hospital and bring people back from the dead. What it means is that you do have transforming power - and always have. You have probably already changed many people's lives for the better in such subtle ways that you don't know it yourselves. Whatever changes in attitudes whatever gracious kind thing you have done has been an act of God. And if you haven't done anything like that - then it is about time! You are being called right now to be loving, forgiving, to pray, to help, to care to cry - to hear God's voice inside of you telling you that you are loved - so go and do likewise.

May our lives also be witnesses to the truth of God on this earth. May we hear the voice of our God - the Father and the Son and the holy spirit - all in one still small voice that sounds like a bleat in our hearts.