

“The Voice of God” – Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 – January 13, 2019

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The first Sunday after Epiphany is called Baptism of the Lord Sunday. When Jesus gets baptized by his cousin John, this event is recognized as the inaugural moment of his ministry. It's one of the few events that is recorded in all four gospels, and while each gospel emphasizes or highlights different points about the event, each one mentions the spirit of God descending on Jesus like a dove or in the form of a dove, and three of the four mention a voice from heaven making a declaration about Jesus, claiming Jesus as Son.

Today I would like to talk about the different voices we hear throughout our lives. I imagine that in the 30 or so years prior to Jesus' baptism, he heard many voices that led him to that place in time where his ministry could begin.

Earliest for him was the voice of his mother, who perhaps told him the amazing stories surrounding his birth and his presentation in the temple, where old Simeon and Anna gave their blessings to him and prophesied his destiny – those stories that had caused Mary to wonder and ponder those amazing things in her own heart. Other voices were the children with whom he played and laughed – who perhaps taught him the qualities of friendship, loyalty, sharing and fair play. And then there were the voices of the teachers and rabbis, who quickly realized that he was a brilliant student – one for whom the understanding of scripture came easily and for whom the stories of Israel's past gave inspiration. One who could not only hear the scripture but could discern and draw new insights from it. Then also the voice of his father Joseph, who taught him the careful trade of woodworking – a profession that required skilled patience and offered much quiet, focused time for deep thought and reflection. He heard the voices of affirmation and love that fed his soul and gave him a love for others.

Along the way he heard other voices. The voices of the poor people in his community, who begged for food and shelter. From the people who were sick with disease and infirmities, who cried out for help and healing. And from his neighbors who grumbled and longed for freedom from the oppressive actions of the Empire of Rome and from the powerful people who used their power to keep others down. From all these various voices, Jesus learned about God and learned to hear the voice of God.

And so when he heard the voice of John, who came out of the wilderness area of Israel to preach repentance and the coming of God, he knew his time had come. He knew it was time to add his voice.

We hear voices in and throughout our lives as well. These are voices that teach us about the world around us – whether it is safe or dangerous - and how we are to function in it. Additionally, these voices help us to discern our purpose. Some of these voices are external,

coming from the people around us. But other voices, which often have a great deal of influence over us, are the internal voices that speak to us. We all hear those internal voices. These are the day to day internal voices that either lift us up with encouragement or drag us down with disparagement. For some people those voices are so distracting they negatively impact one's ability to function, and in those cases, medical intervention is necessary to help.

The external and internal voices we listen to either help us to or hinder us from hearing the voice of God.

On Facebook I belong to a group of clergy people who are single. The members of the group share about their good and bad experiences of being ministers who do not have a spouse or significant other in their lives. Yesterday, one clergywoman shared a story of moving into a new neighborhood and going to a local pub in order to watch a hockey game. While there, a couple men started speaking to her – one of which kept highlighting the positive attributes of his single friend. The conversation was jovial and friendly. But things quickly cooled down when the woman shared the nature of her vocation in life. Nothing ends a party like the revelation that your new companion is a member of the clergy. Sometimes I think we should just wear a big red C on our foreheads to alert the world of our presence.

So the woman shared this story – she had not gone to the pub with the purpose of finding a single man. She just wanted to watch a hockey game and not be alone. But, confronted by a situation where a potential date was impacted by her clergy status, she began hearing those voices in her head that tell her – you're not good enough. You're too old. You're not attractive. You'll never have a date with a decent man. You might as well give up.

And the members of the Facebook group responded to her post. Some commiserated, but most countered those negative voices. Pointing out the things she missed or might miss in the future, if she allowed those negative voices to have the last word. They reminded her that she was good enough, that she was loved, that her presence in the world was meaningful and necessary. Those reminders of her worth – in God's eyes and in the eyes of her colleagues – helped her to put aside the damaging voices that made her feel so bad. She commented that she was grateful for the support of the group and for having a safe place to share the things that bother her.

But sometimes the damaging voices persist, despite the intervention of friends.

A young doctor who was teenager when I started my ministry at my previous church often blogs about depression and mental illness. He writes from the perspective of a doctor. But he also writes as one who has battled against depression throughout his life and who knows it will continue to be a daily struggle. Not long ago he wrote a blog post about the time, four

years ago, when he found himself standing on the ledge of a 7-story parking structure next to the hospital where he had just finished a shift.

He doesn't remember much about the walk that led him to that place, but he remembered feeling a heaviness and what he described as a desensitization of his body and feelings. Nothing mattered anymore. He stood there, listening as, what he called "the various factions of his brain battled it out." He eventually made it back to his car, drove home, drank himself to sleep, and entered treatment three days later. He is in a different place in his life today, but the battle still goes on within him. And he writes about depression and mental illness to reduce the stigma around it and to encourage others to seek help.

I bring this up today because so many people that I know struggle with depression or listening to external and internal voices that are not helpful. That are in fact harmful. Sometimes when we ourselves struggle, we can't hear the right words, or when we see others around us struggle, we try to speak the right words. But we often don't know what to say, or the other person is not in a place to hear us. Sometimes, try as we might, we cannot hear the voice of God over the other voices that seem to have hold of our full attention.

I have struggled with depression throughout my life, as have members of my family. Sometimes it is hard to hear the voice of God through all the other external and internal voices who want to bring you down.

You don't have to face it alone. There is help available. The voice of God is still speaking. Sometimes we just need a little bit of help to be able to hear it again.