

“A Voice in the Dark”

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Based upon John 1:43-51; 1 Sam. 3:1-10

Every once and while in this life, we can be blessed with an experience which not only touches us in the moment, it also lingers with us, transforming how we see and understand the world forever. I had one of those experiences about seven or eight years ago in Atlanta, when a couple of my friends and I bought tickets to a program called “*Dialogue in the Dark*,” in which you basically pay for the privilege of being rendered completely blind by your environment for an hour. In a building made so dark that you could not see your own hand in front of your face, a group of about a half a dozen people and I were led by a blind guide through what felt, smelled, and sounded like a walk in the park, grocery shopping, a boat trip, crossing a busy street, and stopping at a café. The only things we had to help us find our way in the darkness were canes, and the sound of our guide’s gentle voice. “Go forward; then move left. We’re at a stream; take this bridge or you’ll get wet. Now this part goes uphill. Follow the sound of my voice...” The few times that our guide, Peter, was silent for a while or got far ahead of us, the rise in anxiety in the group was palpable. “Peter? Where are you?” we tried to ask casually, while thinking desperately, “It better not be a part of this experience to leave us here to find our way out on our own!” The purpose of the exhibition was to teach people to appreciate better the challenges that blind people must deal with every day. It certainly did that in spades. So to those of you here who struggle with vision problems, believe me when I say, my admiration for what you do each day is great. But for me, the *Dialogue* experience was also profoundly spiritual. It felt like a parable about discipleship in a way. Here we are on earth, groping our way in the dark, not knowing what the future holds, trying to make wise choices, all the while being fiercely challenged by our present. Life can be difficult and feel scary for all kinds of reasons. But God is with us in the dark, and that makes all the difference. If we listen for God’s voice, even if the darkness does not go away, then we can find our way safely.

But what if you cannot hear the voice of God? What if you cannot feel God guiding you in the darkness, or feel your way forward with God’s help? I touched on this issue last week when we thought about whether the scribes and priests who knew the Bethlehem prophecy recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and I’ve preached on the issue many other times as well because it’s one of the “core issues” of discipleship. We wonder about God. We wonder about how God views our sinfulness. We wonder about why there is so much suffering if God is good. We wonder about what happens when we die. And we wonder about how we can experience the love and grace of the God Jesus Christ embodied and proclaimed. The people who created the Lectionary know this, which is probably why they assigned texts about discerning God’s call immediately after the texts which proclaim Christ’s birth.

Both the call stories for today affirm that God is here, knows us, and call us. But before we consider them, I want to recognize that for many people these texts can be as discouraging as they are inspiring. In Samuel’s famous call experience, God calls Samuel by name three times. He gets to hear an actual voice talking to him. In Nathanael’s call experience, Jesus not only shows up in person to talk to him, he also proves that he is God by doing a kind of psychic

reading of Nathanael. “I know what you were doing before I got here,” he says with his fig tree comment. Isn’t this exactly what we dream would happen to us? If we could only have these experiences, we would all probably leap up and follow Jesus readily too. But he is not here physically anymore, and although some people are blessed to hear an actual voice they believe is God, more people are not than are. That can make life feel like we are stuck in *Dialogue in the Dark* without the dialogue. It’s not funny, it’s really dark, and the whole thing seems unfair.

Since I was blessed 21 years ago to hear God’s voice calling in the dark, I’ve been thinking all week, and reading many of the dozens and dozens of books out there on spiritual discernment, to see if I could come up with neat and tidy multi-step plan which I could offer today which would allow all of you and anyone else who wants to hear and feel God too. But the truth is that I don’t know why I got to hear God’s voice and others don’t, and as Jesus told Nicodemus when he came to him in the dark to try to discover how to acquire Jesus’ power, “The wind blows where it will. You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8). In other words, even faithful human beings cannot engineer situations which require God to speak or provide a supernatural sign to them. There is no incantation, no prayer or sacrifice or other ritual which gives us that kind of control over God. So all the discernment books out there focus more on teaching people how to put themselves in places, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, which tend to be “windy” in the Johannine sense of being where God’s Spirit likes to be. “Worship regularly,” the books advise. “Pray unceasingly. Study the Word of God. Serve others in God’s name.” That’s not only good advice; it is also really all that we can do.

Samuel was in about as windy a place as we can imagine. He was asleep in the Temple, “the house of God.” He was there, not because he was on a youth lock-in, but because God’s home was also his home, ever since his mother Hannah dedicated him to God in gratitude for his birth. But at the time of the story, even though Samuel had grown up in the hallowed halls of the Temple with priests as godparents, he had never experienced or heard God himself. The narrator tells us by way of explanation for this that “the Word of the Lord was rare in those days,” which raises all kinds of questions of its own. Was it rare even to the priests of the Temple? Was it rare because God wasn’t speaking or because the people weren’t listening? This story takes place during the time of the Judges, when Israel was supposed to be living as a theocracy with God as their invisible king. It should have been a time when they heard God all the time. But according to the *Book of Judges*, it ended up being a time during which people more often than not did what they wanted to do, instead of following God’s commands. So the reason for the glaring divine silence was probably more that the people weren’t listening, than that God wasn’t speaking.

Anyway, when God woke Samuel up, he didn’t recognize the voice as God’s because he wasn’t expecting it. He assumed it was the voice of the priest Eli, whom he served. So as we heard, he kept running to Eli instead of answering God. It took three times for old Eli, who was clearly rusty hearing God himself, to recognize what was going on. Finally, he told Samuel that the voice was God’s, and told him how to respond, and Samuel began having his own conversations with God, which led him to become the first great prophet.

Moving to the New Testament lesson, Nathaniel, according to *John*, was also in a spiritually windy place. He was sitting studying the Word of the Lord. This isn't immediately obvious from the way that John writes. The only clue we have as to what Nathanael was doing is Jesus' comment: "I saw you when you were sitting under the fig tree." So for all we know he could have been napping under that tree. But "to be under the fig tree" is actually a Jewish idiom which means to be studying the messianic prophecies. The idiom comes from *Micah* 4:4, which says that in the future messianic kingdom, "Each of them will sit under his vine, and under his fig tree." If Nathaniel was sitting there reading and praying about the messianic prophecies, then two other parts of the story make more sense. One is Nathanael's disdain for Nazareth. No prophecies had the messiah coming from Nazareth. The other is Jesus' comment to Nathanael: "Here is a man in which there is no deceit." That line is from *Isaiah* 53:9, one of the messianic prophecies. So not only was Jesus saying, "I knew you were studying the scriptures before I got here," he also greeted Nathaniel by quoting what he had been reading. No wonder Nathanael responded by saying that Jesus was "the Son of God and the king of Israel."

But as interesting as this all is, it's not Jesus' omniscience that I want us to focus on today, it's Nathanael's behavior. He was doing what he should have been doing to deepen his understanding of God, but if it hadn't been for Philip, he still might have missed the fact that the Messiah he had been reading about and praying for was only a short walk away. "Come and see," Philip said. "I think this guy is the real deal." "He can't be the real deal if he comes from Nazareth," Nathanael replied dismissively, perfectly content to go back to his reading and prayer. If it hadn't been for Philip's persistence, Nathanael might never have had his dialogue with God. Philip, in other words, was Nathanael's Eli. He was the one who connected Nathanael and God, by recognizing before Nathanael did that God was at hand.

One of the lessons both call stories teach us therefore, is about the importance of listening not just for God's voice, but also to the voices of others. Not only is it easier for all of us to hear those voices, it is often in the voice of others, that we hear the Word of God. Last month in our book group, we read a book on the spirituality of Anthony De Mello, a priest in India who was a seemingly endless source of great stories. One of his favorite stories was about a temple which had bells in it which makes just this point.¹ The story goes that the bells made such exquisite music that if you heard them you would experience spiritual ecstasy. The temple was on an island that eventually was consumed by the ocean. But legend had it that if you listened intensely, you could still hear the bells under the ocean. So one day a man came who desperately wanted to hear the bells. He sat on the beach on the shore opposite where the island used to be and listened very carefully. But all he could hear was the waves. Despite weeks of effort, he was unsuccessful. So he went to town to tell the people the legend was fake. But they insisted that it was true. Resigned to the fact that the problem must be with him, therefore, the man decided then to go home. On his way home, he stopped on the beach one more time to say goodbye to his dream. This time he didn't listen for the bells. He just listened to the waves, and they created a silence within him so deep that he stopped thinking about himself and the bells and only heard the waves. It was then he started to hear the bells, first one and then another. It was then that he experienced the spiritual ecstasy he had sought.

¹ Stroud, J. Francis, [Praying Naked: The Spirituality of Anthony De Mello](#), (New York: Image Books, 2005), 43-44.

I think sometimes we all, including myself, try so hard to hear the bells that we cannot hear that God is speaking to us through the waves. We long for something magic or otherworldly to assure us that God is real and knows us and is still speaking to us today. But as Jesus came into our world to convey personally the message of God's love, so God comes to us today in a worldly way. God comes in the form of our friends who bring us soup when we are sick even without our asking. God comes in the form of the acquaintance whose off-hand remark feels like a zinger because it addresses exactly what we prayed about the night before. God comes to us in the form of children who can hear God's voice more easily than we can, and elderly folks, who have experienced enough of the saving power of God's grace in their lives to assure us that Jesus is here even if we can't feel it. These are the voices we need to listen to carefully. They are our Elis and Philips; they are the waves which carry the music.

I have heard the voice of God as an otherworldly voice only once. But God has never stopped talking to me since then. God speaks to me in a variety of ways, sometimes through the wind in the trees, sometimes through the words of scripture, sometimes in dreams that are an answer to prayer, sometimes in the advice of friends or in ideas that I cannot brush aside as much as I try. The way I know that what I am hearing or seeing is a word of the Lord is that the phrases or ideas stand out as if they are highlighted. But since ordinary messengers carry them, if I'm not paying attention, I can miss them. Then God usually has to send the same message again and again in increasingly more intense ways to get my attention.

If you have felt the presence of God in your life, or heard God speaking to your heart, think about the ways that God has delivered the message. Does God speak to you most through family members, church friends, strangers? Does God call to you in sunsets or comfort you through the people you help? If you know how God typically reaches you, then you know where to tune your ear and your attention if you are seeking a new word from the Lord. If you have not ever felt like God has communicated with you or called you, then listen closely to the people who cross your path all the time. This Church is filled with Elis and Philips. We are God's word to you that God is real, that you are known, and that God is still speaking and is showing you the way in the dark.

In a few minutes we are going to be ordaining and installing our new church officers. Talk to them after the service about how or why they said yes to their calls. I suspect some will tell you they felt God tugging on their hearts in very personal ways, and others will say that are serving simply because they were asked. But either way, they are all here because a nominating committee of Elis and Philips played intermediary between God and them. We all can be intermediaries and translators in this way, and probably are more often than we realize because that is one of the ways that God speaks.

“Do not make an idol of discernment,” Quaker tradition advises. “The only priority worth having is knowing and loving God. Stay in the space of Love. Do not be lured out of it. If discernment follows, fine; if not, so be it. Let it rest lightly.”² Sometimes we just have to

² Farnham, Suzanne, Gill, Joseph P., McLean, R. Taylor, and Ward, Susan M., Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community, (Harrisburg: Morehouse Pub., 1991), 35.

stop trying to hear the bells and just enjoy the sound of the waves. Sometimes we must wait in the dark longer than we would prefer to before we can hear a voice saying, “This is the way, walk in it.” That’s OK, because we know through Jesus Christ that God is always with us, even when we can’t feel God or recognize God’s voice. We will never be left alone to find our way in the dark, and God will never stop speaking. This is the good news of the Gospel. Thanks be to God! Amen.