

SERMON: So Many Voices

TEXT:

In the Mental Health First Aid class I took last month, we engaged in an exercise that was designed to demonstrate the auditory hallucinations experienced by persons who suffer from schizophrenia. With three people in each group, two of them would begin a conversation – small talk about the holidays or plans for coming weekend. After the conversation began, a third person would begin to whisper in the ear of one of the others.

We were alerted ahead of time that this could be disturbing, and anyone who was nervous or hesitant about it could opt out. Well, it was very disturbing, and while some people laughed it off, others were clearly unsettled by it after only a few seconds. As the person who had another voice whispering in my ear, I found it to be very distracting and annoying. I had a hard time focusing on my conversation with the other person, and I wanted to tell the whisperer to stop. I was even tempted to slap it away. And as the person who was talking with someone hearing the voices, I felt annoyed that she wasn't listening well, wasn't paying attention to me.

It was a very simple, but also a very important and valuable exercise, helping me to gain some understanding of what those with schizophrenia are going through.

While it's nothing compared to schizophrenia, we all have some experience with a lot of different voices coming to us at the same time. There are voices of advice – solicited and unsolicited. There are demanding voices, judging voices, complaining voices, worried voices, bossy voices, whiney voices, threatening voices, arrogant voices. To be fair, there are also compassionate voices, encouraging voices, positive voices, and hopeful voices. And they all seem to get louder when there are important decisions to be made. SO MANY VOICES. But which one to listen to?

You might think, well, the voice of God, of course! But how do you distinguish the voice of God from all the others? We all know one thing, it's not always going to be the most comforting or compassionate voice.

In fact, if we think back to Psalm 29, we will remember that the voice of God thunders. It is powerful and full of majesty, breaking full grown trees and

flaming with fire. It shakes the wilderness and strips the forest bare. It is full of glory and majesty and strength.

These descriptions of the voice of the Lord are not terribly comforting, are they? I mean, thunder and fire and destruction? It makes me feel like the cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz. When the “great and powerful” Oz speaks, his voice is full of thunder and devoid of compassion, making the lion faint when summoned forward. Then, when the wizard has given his instructions and commands, “I said, Go!,” the lion runs for his life down the hall and crashes through the window of the palace in fear.

Now, I imagine most of us are to the point where we believe in a loving God and we understand that the idea of “fearing” the Lord means that we have the highest respect for God. But if you’ve ever been called, you may well understand the fear of the unknown and the fear of not having the skill or the wisdom or the courage to answer – or even understand – the call.

Not only are there many voices out there, but for me today there were many choices for what to preach on. Epiphany was Friday, so there’s the story of the wise men arriving to worship the newborn Jesus. Today is Baptism of the Lord

Sunday, so we typically hear the story of when a thirty-year-old Jesus was baptized by John. Then, we are ordaining and installing elders today, so we usually focus on what it means to be called by God.

Actually, I think I've found the intersection of these three paths. Remember that the wise men were warned *by a voice* you might say, in a dream, to return to their homeland by another road and not report to Herod where they found the child. Also, as we heard in the baptism story, a voice – God's voice – speaks from heaven, declaring Jesus as God's son. And many who are called by God – including those being ordained and installed today – might say that they've heard God's voice, in one way or another.

Hearing the voice, of course, is not nearly as difficult as listening and following its commands. Not to mention discerning which among SO MANY VOICES is the voice of God.

So, how do we do that, you ask? Well, certainly reading scripture can help us to learn about the call of God in history, whom God calls, and what God calls them to do. Being in community with other believers, worshipping together, studying God's word, serving and praying together can lead us to hear God's

voice. And times of private prayer as well, times when we can sit in silence, away from all the other voices, can help us hear the still, small voice of God.

Finally, I want to share one of my favorite stories with you. Back when the telegraph was the fastest means of long-distance communication, there was a story about a young man who applied for a job as a Morse code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper, he went to the address that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large, noisy office. In the background, a telegraph clacked away. A sign on the receptionist's counter instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office.

The young man completed his form and sat down with seven other waiting applicants. After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of the inner office, and walked right in. Naturally, the other applicants perked up, wondering what was going on. Why had this man been so bold? They muttered among themselves that they hadn't heard any summons yet. They took more than a little satisfaction in assuming the young man who went into the office would be reprimanded for his presumption and summarily disqualified for the job.

Within a few minutes the young man emerged from the inner office escorted by the interviewer, who announced to the other applicants, “Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has been filled by this young man.” The other applicants began grumbling to each other, and then one spoke up, “Wait a minute. I don’t understand. He was the last one to come in and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That’s not fair.”

The employer responded, “All the time you’ve been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse code: ‘If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours.’ None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did, so the job is his.”

It helps to know the one whose voice you’re listening for and the sort of message you will hear. Are you listening?

AMEN.