

<Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 26:1-8; Matthew 16:21-28>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Whose voice do you listen to in your life, and what does it tell you? When life is challenging and you feel uncertain, whose voice do you hear and what message does it offer?

I remember once when I was much younger, after I knew that I was called to ministry but before I had begun seminary, before I had begun my academic work for this journey, that I was in a moment of determination: I was feeling very uncertain about the next step to take. I don't even remember the exact details, just that I was feeling very much adrift. I do remember, in that moment, reaching out to someone at the presbytery who was responsible for my development as a minister, asking him for guidance. And during the conversation I made a comment about how I wished, like Moses, that I could have a divine voice out of a burning bush telling me, plainly, what to do next.

I should mention that, at that time, I was volunteering with the local fire department, learning and exploring ministry within that context of community service. My colleague, the one I was turning to with my doubts and questions, also volunteered in *his* local community. And it was important that I had his voice in my life at that time because, in response to my desire to have a voice offering instruction from a burning bush, he asked his own question of me. "But Jason, you know what firefighters do with a burning bush, right? We put it out."

It was a humorous response, and one I needed in order to break the tension I had placed on the situation. A situation which, really, was not that serious. But like many such lessons, it carried a deeper meaning, as well, and that was the question: 'whose voice are you listening to right now?' That question is important and applicable to all of us, all the time, not just on Sunday morning when we may be gathered in worship, perhaps hoping to hear a metaphorical, or even literal, voice from a burning bush as we wrestle with life. Because, friends, you don't need me to tell you that there are any number of voices in this world clamoring for your attention, shouting out what they think you should believe in your life and the world around you.

Whose voice do you listen to?

This past week my family and I had the privilege of spending time at Chautauqua Institution, where the chaplain for the week was Father Gregory Boyle. Now, if that name is somewhat familiar to you, it's for good reason. Father Boyle, or Father G as he's more commonly known, began one of the first and most impactful ministries of working to address gang violence and lifestyle in Los Angeles in the 1980's. He, along with members of his congregation, began doing what was almost unheard of at that time and in that place: treating these gang members as actual human beings.

I know, radical, right? But at the time, it certainly was.

One of the first realities he encountered, and which he discovered he most needed to address if such a ministry was going to be effective in showing the God of love to these people whose lives were determined by violence, drugs, and turf wars, was that they needed to hear a different voice. Up to that point, these young men and the people who were in orbit around their lives had only heard the voice of this world in all its lowest forms.

Voices telling them that they were unworthy. Voices telling them that they were unwanted. Voices telling them that they were worthless. Less than. Unnoticed. Perhaps you have heard the whispers of some of these voices in your life. Perhaps you have even listened to them at one time or another. If so, there is no shame in this; you certainly would not be the first, nor will you be the last.

There is a part of the Moses story that I deeply love, and it can be found in the verses near the beginning of our reading from Exodus this morning. It comes just at the point when Moses, keeping the sheep of his father-in-law in the wilderness, has noticed the burning bush but before God truly speaks. Because that is the moment of determination; it is the moment in which the arc of the rest of Moses's life is going to be determined. It's the point when he chooses which voice to listen to.

Moses, as we may remember from Sunday School, had already had quite the life. Born of the Hebrew people but floated down the river by his mother and sister, Moses was found by the daughter of Pharaoh and brought up in the royal household, believing he was a prince. Then, upon discovering his true parentage - long before DNA tests or 23 & Me ever existed - he realized that the treatment of the people he had viewed as slaves was no longer acceptable. In anger and in the heat of a moment, he killed a man, and then fled from his old life in fear.

He has been on the run ever since, running from and running with the voices of this world which may have named him in a low manner, and by their own terms. Murderer. Failure. Imposter.

And as we find Moses in this moment of determination, I can only imagine what he is thinking and feeling, but I don't have to imagine very hard. I don't imagine many of you would have difficulty sensing, as well, what Moses might have been feeling, or what voices he might have been living with, listening to, determined by.

Peter, likewise, is in a moment of determination, and yet again, we do not need to stretch our imaginations too far to understand his point of view, or to guess the voices he has been living with, listening to. Because Jesus, the one whom Peter has committed to follow, the one who has shown miracles and offered teachings, the one who just moments earlier Peter himself has declared to be the Messiah, Jesus has once more spoken about how that will lead to his death. And the voice in Peter's ear, the voice in his spirit, tells Peter that Jesus must be wrong. That Peter's understanding of

the situation is more correct than that of the newly-named Messiah. That Peter could not possibly be following one who would come to such an end.

Peter, too, was listening to the wrong voices. And in Jesus’ declaration, this time it was the voice of the deceiver, the voice of the tempter, the voice of Satan. And here, in the Greek, Jesus uses the word of rebuke that is only used one other time in Matthew’s gospel, way back in chapter 4 when Satan has been tempting Jesus and Jesus, in turn, finally rebukes and sends Satan away.

To the casual observer, Jesus rebukes Peter in the same way and with the same intensity that he rebuked Satan. But it is not Peter being rebuked; rather, it is the voice whispering incorrect nothings in Peter’s spiritual ear.

Jesus, in his rebuke, offers Peter liberation, not damnation. As one of my now favorite commentators observes, “Jesus liberates us from everything—the evil one included—that keeps us on hamster wheels of false thinking, theological ideas that are too small, and from gods made in our own minds or in our own images that lead to harmful and wasteful lives” (Chelsey Harmon, *Center for Excellence in Preaching*).

In other words, Jesus offers Peter a better voice to listen to. Jesus offers Peter the Divine voice, God’s voice, and not *just* the voice, but also the message it proclaims. Jesus rebukes, but then immediately teaches, and in teaching, redeems and lifts Peter back up. The voice of love resets the pathway of faithful journey, and renames - rightly - the one who hears it.

The voice that comes to Moses out the bush that burned but was not consumed was one of redemption and validation, which set Moses on his faithful course as God’s servant and guide to the people who had forgotten God, who had never truly known God. The person who, with the world’s voice, felt incapable, in God’s voice now becomes the one who leads everyone else to the same understanding - that they will be redeemed. That they will be drawn close. That they will be loved.

Father G, in reflecting on the ministry he engages, puts it this way: “once you know the God of love, you fire all the other gods.” Once you hear the voice of God calling you beloved, you fire all the gods of this world which try to tell you otherwise. We hear these voices, intimately. But God’s voice calls, still; what does God’s voice tell you about your life? Our lives? Others lives?

Make no mistake, the voice of God, the voice of Love may lead us where we do not expect to go, but it will lead us to life, and it will lead us to the fullness of relationship with God. And that is precisely where we are supposed to be. Precisely where we are invite others to be. Precisely the voice we are to listen to, above and against any voice of this world which would dare to tell us otherwise. May we listen to God’s voice, and fire all the other gods of this world. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*