

Resurrection Witness: Following One Voice

Acts 9: 36-43

John 10: 22-30

We routinely encounter dozens of voices every day, maybe even hundreds. In our media dense environment, the voices speak to us from the TV, from radio, from print, from books and magazines, from signs and billboards and posters, from snail mail and email, by telephone, and a whole lot more. I haven't even mentioned the people we might encounter directly. Okay, it's more like hundreds of voices, even on a quiet day at home.

We can't truly listen to each voice that we're exposed to. We have filters to sort through what we pay attention to and what we ignore. Even without caller ID (which I don't have on my office phone), you can tell within seconds that the solicitor who is calling you is nothing that you want to listen to and you hang up. While the TV drones on, you can filter out the ads from the show you're watching, or you zone out over the radio ads that interrupt the program, or the pledge break on public radio. As you drive along, you hardly notice the billboards and signs, unless there is something different and eye-catching. Your filters are working all the time.

But if I'm looking for a Waffle House (let's say) that's tucked behind a couple of gas stations off the interstate, those yellow letters will scream at me and I will hear. But when there's a Walgreens across the way from a CVS, I can't honestly remember which one is which. And how much does it matter?

That's the other thing about our filters. Their screening gives us a greater likelihood of paying attention to what matters to us. That's their design; to filter the "noise" and to catch the priorities.

So, when you had kids, I'll bet you could enter a room full of chattering children and pick out your kid's voice from across the room. You could stand in the doorway and in a few seconds pick out the familiar sound and zoom in on your kid's location faster than a GPS can recalculate.

That's what Jesus is talking about in the passage from John's gospel. He is in Jerusalem at the Temple and the Jews pounce on him. "The Jews" here refers to the establishment types, not garden variety citizens. They are sufficiently connected to have a question about his claims and the orthodoxy of his teaching, and they demand an answer. Their question gets translated as: *How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.*

That phrase, *keep us in suspense*, is an idiom that translators don't know how to interpret precisely. An idiom is a form of speech that someone conversant in that language would understand, but someone else might not. If you say that someone *kicked the bucket*, someone unfamiliar with the idiom will wonder what you're talking about. You know very clearly that it means someone died. This is important because the question of the Jews here could be seen as expectant, eager to hear Jesus' self-

declaration, or annoyed and irritated because Jesus has been teasing them with the idea. There is general agreement that these Jews are miffed and a bit surly.

Not helping their surliness, Jesus declares that he **has** told them repeatedly, but they are **not** listening. Their filters have screened out the message he has been communicating while they're focused on trapping him and getting rid of him. If they haven't heard him speak his truth directly, then it's because his disclosure is in all the things he has been doing; his ministry is speaking for itself, in other words.

(By the way, it's a bad translation in our pew Bible that has Jesus saying: "The **miracles** I do in my father's name speak for me." That word "miracles" is really quite clear in Greek – *erga* like ergonomics – which very simply means "works." A correct translation would have Jesus saying: "The **works** I do in my father's name speak for me." Works may include miracles, but it means **a whole lot more** than miracles, like feeding the poor, ministering to outcasts, caring for the stranger, being gracious and compassionate to so-called sinners, sharing a meal with the unclean, etc.)

Others know exactly what Jesus is doing and know exactly what it's all about. They are listening to his voice. These listeners are like sheep who recognize the voice of the shepherd. The sheep don't need to be told who the shepherd is; they know the shepherd by what he does for the sheep and what he does with the sheep. The shepherd doesn't need a nametag.

But as obvious as the shepherd may be to the sheep, the meaning and character of this individual is a bit of an enigma to the mainstream Jewish leadership, and it's got them ticked off. They want an answer.

We should also realize that taking the name of "shepherd" is not simply a pastoral metaphor. Jewish kings are frequently referred to as "shepherd," and bad kings are depicted as "bad shepherds." Declaring himself a shepherd to the sheep is very close to declaring oneself a king over the people. At the very least, it is seen as the re-establishment of God's sovereignty over his people, the coming of God's Kingdom, the coming of the shepherd to his people. With the Jewish establishment anxious about whether Jesus is claiming he's the Messiah, this talk of the shepherd and his sheep is powerful stuff indeed!

As Jesus continues to try to identify himself correctly, we should actually read backward. If we jump ahead to vs 30, Jesus says: *The Father and I are one*. Most scholars do not see this as Jesus saying that he is the same as the Father. In fact, nowhere will we find that statement, an important thing for "Jesus-is-God" people to reckon with. Jesus is not God in scripture. However, Jesus does say they are **one**, as in one in unity of purpose and mission and kingdom. It is God's Kingdom and Jesus is Lord. God brings life, and Jesus brings life. Jesus is empowered by God, but Jesus is not God. Right now, you might have that whole trinity thing running through your mind – good!

If we've got that separation of Jesus and the Father clear, then backing into vs. 28 and 29, Jesus explains how he gives eternal life and how that blessing is given by God to Jesus. And while they may try snatching eternal life from Jesus by killing him, no one can snatch eternal life from the Father, and therefore the promise continues. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise of God, the fulfillment of the shepherd for God's people, the fulfillment of the Lord having come to bring God's Kingdom. Jesus and the Father are united, solidly one in purpose, in mission, and in the Kingdom goals.

Finally, Jesus' declaration that he and the Father are one also represents their being able to hear each other and respond to each other. There is one voice and one purpose and one mission and one Kingdom; God and Jesus are on the same wavelength, completely.

Now we might expect that Jesus and God would be on the same wavelength, sharing a unity in all things, being one, being on the same page. How does this work for the follower of Jesus?

In the reading from Acts, we find Peter. Now he is ministering, a leader in the movement of Jesus people, a shepherd to the sheep. Remember last week, in a resurrection appearance, Jesus confronts Peter, challenging his declaration of love, urging him to feed the sheep, calling him to become the good shepherd, and Peter going silent, refusing the call of ultimate faith and complete self-sacrifice. By this point in Acts, Peter is now the shepherd to the sheep, having accepted the role that left him speechless previously.

Peter is called to Joppa where a disciple of Jesus known for her faithful service, her caring and compassion, became sick and died. This story is a near verbatim retelling of the same story of Jesus raising the daughter of Jairus. Even the names are nearly identical; Talitha and here Tabitha.

In itself, the story is rather unremarkable since it is so close to the Jesus story. Still, it does point out that the work of Jesus is carried forward by his faithful disciples, in this case by Peter. The work of faithful servants is not simply about preaching and telling folks about Jesus. This story reminds us that all such ministry is about a resurrection witness, confronting darkness and death, standing opposite those forces that would seek to claim sovereignty over the life and promise of God – snatching away life eternal.

Let's pay attention to the voices. Peter receives a call from two men: *Please come to us without delay*. Peter doesn't say no, doesn't delay, but listens to these voices and responds.

When he arrives in Joppa after about 5-10 mile journey, he finds the town mourners are out in force and probably in full shriek mode. They're making a big show, likely waving the clothing like flags, clothing that the woman had made ... when she was alive, because now she's dead!

These aren't the voices that Peter needs to listen to. This is not a resurrection witness. But there is a voice he needs to be present to. He knows he needs this.

He shoos away the shrieking mourners who can do their job at a distance just fine. Peter needs some peace. Peter needs to pray. Peter needs to be present to the voice that is life eternal. Peter prays, and that is his truest resurrection witness. Peter surely hears the voice that he needs to hear, that all things are possible through faith. Reminded that he is the shepherd now, he is given the blessing of eternal life to share, the blessing that cannot be snatched away.

After his prayer, he commands, just like Jesus, "Tabitha, arise." Death is turned aside; life triumphs as she stands and is presented to the now silenced mourners whose concern is no longer whether their wailing is sufficiently loud and impassioned, but whether or not they're going to get paid.

In Peter's story, we're reminded that faithful empowerment is not simply about us, but about the power of dark forces to use death, to exercise control, to exploit, bully, and oppress. Our role is to stand as witnesses to the living faith and promise of God for others.

This resurrection witness is not just about my own self-preservation and well-being, about whether the promise of new life is for me. Of course it is; that's already assured with no doubt about that whatsoever.

The question is whether my witness of faith has the depth and strength to confront worldly forces and stand as Jesus did, within the power of faith and the blessing of God, staring down the powers, despite any threat they may pose. Here, we're summoned to strength of faith not for ourselves or own benefit, but so that the will of God is accomplished in the lives of sisters and brothers.

What both scriptures remind us is that there is one voice for to follow, the one who is shepherd for the faithful.

In Peter's story, death's claim on Tabitha is denied by his faithful act. In the same way, by our faithful action, acting like Peter, we become missionaries of life over death, hope over despair, and promise over betrayal. In our resurrection witness, we pay close attention to the voice that matters, with our filter attuned to make that voice our priority. Then we minister with faithful resolve, as we show how we are one with Jesus, one with God, one in purpose, mission, and blessing to bring life out of death, hope out of despair, and peace out of the chaos. The shepherd is speaking. Let the sheep listen.