

The Voice We Listen To

Isaiah 40: 3-11 John 10: 1-10

There are many voices that clamor for our attention and we have to sort them out. Some are simply noisy and unhelpful. Others are so valued that we wish we had a recording. Generally, we've adapted to tuning out the voices that are noisome and unproductive, while tuning in the voices that matter and have value.

These days we may be all ears when the scientists are talking about what is happening and what can be expected with COVID-19, but we may tune out when the politicians start yammering. Early on, someone noted how during the Gulf War we really didn't care to listen to any politicians, but we were all ears when General Schwartzkopf was explaining what was going on. Today, the generals in command are scientists; the politicians' job is to stay out of the way and support what they're saying needs to be done. Some haven't adapted to that role yet. The astute person listens to the voice that has the authority to address a subject and tunes out the ones that don't.

The parent's voice is one of those voices that bears dual qualities; it gets tuned in when it's desired, and tuned out when it isn't. This is preparation for marriage.

Here is a story about the authority of a given voice.

A mom was out walking with her 4-year-old daughter when the girl picked up something from the ground and started to put it in her mouth. The mother took the item away from her and asked her not to do that.

The little girl quickly asked, "But why?"

"Because it's been lying outside, you don't know where it's been, it's dirty and probably has germs," I replied.

At this point, the little girl looked at her mom with total admiration and asked, "Wow! How do you know all this stuff?"

The mom thought quickly and said, "All moms know this stuff. It's on the Mommy Test. You have to know it, or they don't let you be a Mommy."

They walked along in silence for a few minutes as she pondered this new information. "Oh...I get it!" she beamed, "So if you don't pass the test you have to be the daddy?"

The mom smiled and replied, "Exactly."

The authority of the voice certainly helps to encourage the listener's attention.

The words of the prophet Isaiah in our first lesson hearken back to the herald we hear during Advent, calling God's people to awaken as the way of the Lord is prepared.

Yet the listeners in the first set of verses are not people, rather it's a shout-out to all corners of creation, to nature, summoned to compose itself in the desired manner to welcome the One who comes from God the Creator.

*Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.*

As the way of the Lord is fulfilled, the Lord's coming shall be encountered not only by nature, but by God's people. We can imagine that God's people are **less** obedient than creation to God's will and purpose.

***Then** the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

This is good news for God's people who are to emerge from Babylonian exile and return to the Promised Land. The time of separation and the ordeal of enslavement and occupation are coming to an end, and the glory of the Lord who forgives and who saves shall be revealed to all of God's people.

A new voice begins vs. 6: *A voice says, 'Cry out!'* This is the signal to God that God knows you seek him and God will respond. The new voice urges the people to cry out to their God as an **act of faith**, that by crying out, they profess that God alone can bring new life and peace, salvation that restores them to God's promise.

The prophet responds with the rather despairing, *What shall I cry?* It's a rhetorical question since Isaiah is aware that there is no reason for God to listen to this people. Despite the muddled punctuation in the pew Bibles that fails to identify the speakers, Isaiah goes on to confess the unworthiness of this people: *All people are grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.*

Then the voice returns from vs. 6, the voice from above, tacitly agreeing and asserting: *The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.* There is no argument that God's people are indeed as fickle and faithless as grass in the heat of the day, like a flower sapped of its life, unable to maintain themselves in faithfulness amid their common daily lives. Their faith withers and dies before the faithful expectations of God – *the breath of the Lord* – or the Spirit of the Lord. No doubt these people are failures and undeserving, but beyond their fickleness and faithlessness is the word of God which transcends their sinfulness with grace and love. It is not due to anything the people have done, but by the grace and faithfulness of God alone toward his people that God will listen and respond.

Isaiah is instructed to announce the good news that God has come to his people: *Here is your God!* God has returned and Babylon has fallen as God's people are freed and able to return to the fold. God is no longer absent; his arm rules, his reward and his recompense are with him. God brings his wayward people, the lost ones, home:

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them close to his heart, and gently lead the mother sheep.

It's an interesting pair of images of God; the warrior whose strong arm is displayed for justice for God's people, and then the loving shepherd who gathers the lambs in his arms and holds them close.

The image of the shepherd as representing sacred love for the innocent, wayward, and lost is a well-known allusion in the Hebrew scriptures that carries into the New Testament as a reference to Jesus. The multi-faceted shepherd image appears in all of the gospels.

In John's gospel, the first half of chapter 10 is devoted to applying this imagery as Jesus describes himself as shepherd among his sheep. His commentary carries over from the conclusion of chapter 9 which was the long, long story about the healing of the blind man. At its end, Jesus has slammed the Pharisees and suggested that the Pharisees were the ones who were in fact blind – not a winning expression of endearment.

As Jesus begins talking about sheep and shepherd in chapter 10, he is simply continuing his diatribe against the Pharisees, or at least the religious-political establishment of the day. For Christians today, voices claiming authority and claiming to speak for Jesus, for God, for a certain kind of righteousness want to be esteemed and valued by contemporary worldly powers. However, they display little than commends them as worthy for listening. They pursue a negative agenda, honoring values that are alien to the promise given witness by the Lord.

Jesus talks about the thief and the robber who try to get to the sheep by means **other** than the gate, trying to slip in among them. Such a thief and robber operates very differently compared to the shepherd who walks through the gate, being known to the watchman, and to whose voice the sheep will listen.

The shepherd knows the sheep by name. (Maybe the shepherd has a name for every sheep, maybe not. Remember this isn't a lesson in animal husbandry, but a description of the One from God working among God's people.) Now recall the scene at the empty tomb when Mary Magdalene realizes that it's Jesus speaking to her when he calls her by name, just like the shepherd addressing the sheep.

The sheep follow the shepherd because they know his voice, it's a familiar voice, it's reassuring, it's come to be trusted. However, these sheep won't follow a stranger, but instead will run away. It's a voice that lacks the authenticity and the worthiness of the

shepherd. Unfamiliar, it's more a cause for alarm that excites panic, confusion, and distress.

Jesus goes on to call himself the gate for the sheep, declaring all predecessors and pretenders (hello, Pharisees, he means you) to be thieves and robbers. Through Jesus, the sheep are given salvation, peace, and pasture. On the other hand, the thief seeks to exploit and destroy the sheep, seeking only to gain for himself. Not a pretty picture for the Pharisees.

In the resurrection faith, there may be many voices trying to claim that what they're telling us is authoritative and authentic. Listening to those voices, and discerning from among those voices is like listening for the shepherd. The shepherd may not tell the sheep what they *want* to hear, but will always keep their best interests uppermost. We have to identify the sources that are trustworthy, faithful, and authentic.

We learned in the Isaiah passage about the character of the God who **listens** for us, who is ready to respond when we cry out. We were reminded of the power of God as strident for justice for his people, yet also as gracious and loving, the shepherd who holds his sheep close and cherishes each one.

Finally, in knowing that the Lord can be seen in every sister and brother, we have to look for the place of the Lord and the work of the Spirit in the lives of those around us. Not simply looking, like they'll have a sign in front of them, or a blinking arrow over their heads, but employing the vastly under-used, under-appreciated skill of listening. As witnesses to the resurrection faith, our ability to listen for where the Lord is, to listen for the expression of brokenness, to listen for the call to serve, is like a visit to the empty tomb where we don't say, "Uh, it's empty?" but rejoice in the words, "He is risen!"

Again, many voices clamor for our attention. Our task in the resurrection faith is to listen for the voice that is authentic, that seeks our presence on the most faithful path that leads to clear waters and green pastures, that would bring all people into the promise of the risen Savior and his Kingdom. It's a continuation of the good news heralded by Isaiah in the advent of the story of God's coming among his people to lead them to his blessing.

The good news story continues today through us as witnesses, as the body of the shepherd at work in the world among the sheep. Seek the empowerment of the Spirit that enables us to listen for the voices of others, and to share the compassionate voice and loving actions of the shepherd who holds each one close, who knows each one by name.