
Recognizing the Voice of God

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Easter 4 – Year B

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am the oldest child in my family, and I'm named after my father, which means that I have spent a lot of my life listening to my mother call for "George," but not knowing really who she was asking for.

Now, as you can imagine, a lot hung on the answer to that question. And so over time I developed a way of learning from her tone of voice what she wanted.

"George" coming from the kitchen could be neutral; somebody needs to set the table.

"George" coming from the driveway was invariably for my father, in the early years, to get the groceries out of the car.

"George" coming from the door of my bedroom? Not such a pleasant sound.

I learned the tone of my mother's voice, and in many cases my life depended on it. Yet we are surrounded by voices in our lives every day. Voices that want us to buy a new product or join a new movement—promising eternal life if we just will.

Or perhaps more internal voices that speak to us out of our own self-interest or depression or anxiety. We hear these voices day in and day out, leading us to wonder, how do we find in all of the cacophony of noise the voice of God? How do we learn to discern among all of these many voices, promising us so many things, the voice of God?

Jesus, in the tenth chapter of John, gives us a very helpful metaphor. Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd and the sheep know my voice. My sheep will follow me, because they know my voice."

Now, to understand the power of this metaphor, you have to understand something about how shepherds worked in Jesus's day. Shepherds would, of course, go out into the fields with their flocks during the day, but at night they all returned to a common enclosure. They all brought their flocks into one place, where they mixed and mingled. One place where one shepherd could keep watch while others slept or talked around the fire—enjoyed some sense of community.

And then, in the morning the shepherd would go to the enclosure and simply walk out, calling his sheep to follow him, sometimes by name. And the sheep, over time, had learned the sound and tone and cadence of the shepherd's voice and they would follow.

Now, wherever there are good shepherds, there are also unscrupulous shepherds.

And the unscrupulous shepherds would come to the enclosure earlier in the morning. And after they saw that their sheep were following their voice, they were known to attempt to mimic the voices of another shepherd in an attempt to have their sheep come out as well.

Now, if this trick worked, then that sheep would go with the other shepherd and often become lunch. Because you couldn't

return with that sheep that night, of course.

So for the sheep, learning the sound of their shepherd's voice was, in fact, life and death.

It's a powerful metaphor that Jesus has given us, but it still doesn't answer the question, how do we learn how to hear the voice of God?

I think there are three things that we need to learn to do: first, I think we need to learn to recognize the quality of God's voice. It's a quality that has weight to it, the weight of authority.

Second, I think we need to learn to recognize the spirit in God's voice. God's voice has a character, a personality, and we can learn to recognize it.

And third, of course, we need to learn how to judge the content of what God's voice says. Content that will be consistent with the principles of Scripture, that we have learned in our reading of the Bible and worshiping.

These three things, quality and spirit and content, are, I think, how we learn how to recognize and listen to God's voice.

Now the quality of God's voice, that sense of tonal quality and cadence, I think, has weight of authority. You will remember the crowd who responds to Jesus by saying that he spoke like one with authority, and not as the scribes. It's something that seems somewhat self-evident—the light and the darkness, the day and the night. You know them when you see them.

But there are some distinctions. The voice of God, I think, has a weight that doesn't try to persuade you of anything. Our own self conscience, at least mine, is constantly trying to persuade me of something. To do this; it's the right thing to do.

The voice of God, I think, does not do that. The voice of God simply states the truth with the weight of authority, without trying to persuade you of anything. It has a quality of being self-evident.

Now the spirit. You know, for many Episcopalians, the voice of God is not a voice that we hear audibly. It's a thought or a perception that we feel or notice. And so it still has a spirit that we can learn to discern, to recognize.

In the letter of James, we are told that the wisdom from above comes first as truth, pure, and then as peacefulness and joyfulness, full of mercy, and the fruits of the spirit. Without, the letter says, even a trace of partiality or hostility. The Word of God has a spirit that we can come to recognize.

Third, of course, is the content. And the content is content that will be consistent with Scripture, with the Bible. We will know it when we see it. Now, as Episcopalians, we believe that everything in the Bible doesn't have the same level of authority. We interpret what is in the Bible based on the life of Christ, the crucifixion and the resurrection and the Ascension. So there are some things in the Bible that are principles to be paid attention to and others that are more incidental.

When Paul, in First Corinthians, tells the church that men should keep their hair short and women should keep their hair long? Incidental.

When Jesus summarizes the law, saying you must love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and body and strength, and you must also love your neighbor as yourself? Principle.

We know these things from coming to church and reading our Bible. We can evaluate what the voice of God is telling us through these principles.

Weight. Spirit. Content. These are the factors that play into our recognizing and discerning the voice of God.

Let me leave you with an image. It is an image that comes from the fourth chapter of Matthew. You will remember that right after Jesus' baptism, Jesus is led into the wilderness to undergo temptations. And there, we are told, Jesus confronts Satan. And though we have imagined Satan in many different ways, Scripture doesn't tell us what Satan looks like. Scripture doesn't say that Satan was some identifiable object that Jesus would have recognized right away, putting himself on the defensive, readying his arguments, knowing that he was in trouble.

I suspect instead, Jesus got hungry. You know the hunger that you feel in the first week of Lent for whatever you just gave up. When Jesus looked at the stones around him, what he saw was the loaves of bread that came out of his mother's oven. What he felt was what that loaf would taste like... maybe with butter. What he wanted was to eat, to feel the pleasure of satisfying his hunger.

It was then, I suspect, that Jesus saw and discerned and heard the voice of God, the weight of authority that resided in the discipline he had adopted to go into the wilderness, and not to eat but to listen for the Word of God.

So when that voice, that feeling, that sense tried to persuade him to eat, it was Jesus who then recalls the words of Deuteronomy: you do not live by bread alone, but by the Word of God which is sustenance.

There, in that temptation, I think we can see weight of authority, spirit, and content. And so, I think, we can follow this simple analysis with many decisions we make in our daily life.

Some are easy, but many are hard. And we will hear many voices telling us what to do, attempting to persuade us to go this way or that. The voice of God will be among them, but we will have to find it looking for the weight of authority, the character of its spirit, and the content of its message.

It will not save us from suffering or failure or disappointment, but it will draw us nearer to God, and it will allow us to make decisions that bring us nearer to God, and therefore live more fully into the eternal life that Christ has promised us.

Amen.