

Can You Hear Me Now?
Matthew 3: 13-17

We had an eventful week in the church office last week. The telephone broke. We could get a dial tone, but then when we pressed buttons to call out, nothing happened. No connection.

Herb Forsythe, our sexton, was dispatched to Staples to buy a new phone. That was easy. Rose unplugged the old phone and set up the new one, including the handset in my office.

Quickly scanning the 50-page instruction booklet, she finally figured out how to make and receive calls and set up the internal answering machine. We were sure that later we could learn how the ‘hold’, ‘intercom’, ‘speaker’ and ‘conference call’ functions worked.

Well, we had trouble from the get-go. We didn’t know how to deal with the second line for the FAX machine; we forgot that we have an outside answering machine service and so didn’t need the telephone one; we interrupted the Internet connection, which, yes, is still a dial up.

Our day was saved by Wayne Dietrich, who, I very quickly realized, was being called by God to be an information technology expert for the Peapack Reformed Church.

But what I also realized was how we are constantly surrounded by voices of others, transmitted by often difficult and confusing technology, which we are becoming absolutely dependent upon. The telephone that speaks for us and takes messages when we aren’t there. The cell phone that takes pictures and sends text messages. Cars with GPS that tell us where to drive and call the rescue squad when we crash. The Internet. iPods. Voices

all around. Voices in music. Voices from machines. Voices in our heads, read-outs from screens.

We are bombarded by sound, surrounded by noise and talk, talk, talk. But how often do we hear the voice of God? What does that voice sound like? What does it say?

The voice of God comes to us in quiet times, when the other sounds are stilled and we can hear ourselves think. It is the voice of honest self-appraisal. Adam and Eve are together in the garden after having eaten that forbidden fruit whence they came to know good and evil. *They heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the evening*, after the action of the day was done. A quiet time.

Quite an image – the voice of the Lord God walking. The Holy Spirit on the move, calling them up short: *...the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”* God knew perfectly well where they were and what they had done. And they knew it too.

How often do we use our technology – the phone, the computer, the TV, the radio – to keep God at bay and to hide ourselves? To hold back those reflective quiet times? To keep God from asking us, “Where are you?”

The voice of God comes to us through suffering, our own or the suffering of others. The verses which Brian read from Isaiah, Chapter 42, are the first of what is known as Isaiah’s Servant Songs. The one who is to come, that is the Messiah, will not act as an all-powerful head of state but will come as a servant to God and as a servant to the people. His agenda will not be self-promotion but rather a focus on the least and the lost: *Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have*

put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street.

This servant of God and of God's people will himself suffer. Later in Isaiah we read more about him: *he had no form or majesty...he was despised and rejected ... acquainted with infirmity...held of no account.* (Isa. 53: 2,3) The voice of God can be heard through suffering and loss.

My daughter Beth told me this past week that one of the teachers in Owen and Claire's nursery school has been diagnosed with lung cancer and the outlook is grim. Beth has organized some of the other parents to make dinners for the family; in that way, they can help them bear the suffering. Meanwhile, Beth has been enjoying the unseasonably warm days when her children can play outside without bundling up in heavy coats and boots and such. Then she told me: "I started to think how I can't wait for spring to come when all the days will be warm like this." But then, when she thought of her teacher friend and how the days of spring might not come at all for her, she realized that she most definitely can wait and will wait, absorbing the joy of every day, which is a gift.

A simple example...but a sure message nonetheless. The voice of God spoke to Beth in this way through the suffering of another. What are the truths of life that we come to learn when we seek to help others, when we act to relieve suffering, feed the hungry and care for the least among us? And when we are the ones to receive that help. Don't we indeed hear the voice of God in all that? The voice that tells us to love one another...

Finally, the voice of God comes to us as blessing.

When Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God

descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The baptism of Jesus reveals his identity as the Son of God – the heavens opening, the Spirit coming down as a dove, and most of all THE VOICE. This is God speaking, no doubt about it. But the baptism of Jesus not only demonstrates who he is but also what God wishes us to be. We receive baptism as Jesus was baptized. The voice of God blesses us.

Kathleen Norris writes:

Baptism...is about celebrating the incomparable gift we receive as creatures beloved of God. But baptism is also about more fully engaging the responsibility that this identity entails. The baptism of Jesus initiated his public ministry, which led him to the cross. For individual Christians, baptism is our call to the community of the church, which often provides us with crosses of our own to bear. Yet it is together, as church, that we are meant to witness to peace in a cruel and violent world and bring a message of hope in the face of despair...baptism marks us for this purpose...God breaks through in order to speak directly to human beings. (Norris 17)

The voice of God blesses us and calls upon us to be a blessing to others. Do you hear that voice? What is pleasing to you about how you are living your life right now? For what blessings do you give thanks? Do you think God is well pleased with you?

When do you hear the voice of God speaking to you? In the quiet times? Over the din of daily life? Through the troubles of the times and the times of trouble?

What does the voice of God speak? A rebuke? A call to love and action? A word of blessing?

Listen, my friends, to all that the voice has to say. Can you hear God now?

Norris, Kathleen. "Marked for a purpose." *Christian Century*. 25 Dec. 2007: 17.

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