Hearing the Voice of God

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Texts:
 Jeremiah 31:31-34
 Psalm 51:1-13
 Hebrews 5:5-10
 John 12:20-33

Lord, grant us grace to love what you command and to desire what you promise — that we may hear your voice. *Señor, concédenos la gracia de amar lo que mandas y desear lo que prometes, para que podamos escuchar tu voz.* Amen.

Good morning! My name is Sally, and I am here with Idalia and Don Valerio of the Vestry, and with Ana and Charles of San Mateo / St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Hyattsville, Maryland. Ana and I are members of the group working on what we call the bathroom project at San Mateo. It’s wonderful to be here with you.

It’s also great to be back in my old neighborhood! I lived for several years on Lanier Place and before that in several other places in Adams Morgan and Mt Pleasant — altogether, more than ten years between 1983 and 1995. And from 1997 to 2022, when I was ordained a Deacon here in the Diocese of Washington, I was a member of St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church, at 16th and Newton Streets.

You may be wondering why we are here today. One big reason is to say, “Thank you!” Another is because we look forward to deepening our relationship in community with you.

Why thank you? Because San Mateo is a church rich in people and skills, but poor in financial resources. We are a community of more than 500 people, most of whom are Spanish-speaking immigrants to the United States. San Mateo is also a generous church. Since a new wave of migrants started arriving in the United States from Venezuela in mid-2022, San Mateo has provided temporary shelter to more than 100 people in the church basement, mostly young people, whether single, in a relationship, or with children. San Mateo has helped them find work, housing, legal assistance, and healthcare, and fed them while living at the church. At any one time, we had up to a dozen people living with us.

We did all this in a church with a sanctuary able to accommodate about three hundred people, but with just two toilet stalls and one wheelchair-accessible bathroom. The building next to the church, which houses the parish hall, kitchen, and a daycare/school program for young children, has just four toilet stalls. We have no showers, no clothes washer or dryer. To accommodate our temporary guests, who slept in the rooms under the church, we put up a rudimentary privacy screen next to a basement door where they could shower using buckets of hot water.

This is now set to change. Thanks to the generosity of the 8th Day Faith Community and other faith organizations, at least one politician, and many individuals — including members of San Mateo — we are getting ready to start work on the first phase of the project. We have the key permits, architectural plans (provided pro bono!), and are only waiting for a Vestry decision as to how much more money we must raise before starting the first, demolition phase of the project.

*The key message here is that we could never have done this alone****.*** We needed the help of the wider faith community. We needed others to hear what we were hearing: the voice of God in the wilderness, the voice of the stranger at the door, the voices of people in need.

*The 8th Day Faith Community heard those voices and responded****.***

What does God’s voice sound like? In today’s Gospel passage (John 12:20-33), we read that some in the crowd said that it was thunder or that they heard only thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Did they hear the same thing? Or does our perspective or position affect how or even whether we hear God’s voice or the voices of those in need?

In preparation for our visit today, I did what I usually do (as a relative newcomer to preaching); I looked to see what others had written.

Two things I came across stood out for me, both in a sermon written in 2018 by the Rev. Kirk Alan Kubicek. First, there is a reference to Gordon Cosby — yes, the same Gordon Cosby who was instrumental in the founding of the Church of the Saviour of which the 8th Day Faith Community is a part. The second was a point made Rev. Kubicek that “to this very day, 90% of the peoples of the world regularly hear” the voice as Jesus did, and that we, as “modern Westerners” [Kubicek’s language] are the exception in not having regular access to communication with God and/or spirits.

The voice of God is referenced in all of today’s readings. God is speaking in the Book of Jeremiah when God talks of a new covenant with the people of Israel, through which all shall know the Lord. In Psalm 51, in which David asks for God’s mercy after having had relations with (“gone into”) Bathsheba, we hear David say, “And so you are justified when you speak.” In today’s Epistle to the Hebrews, we read, “but [Christ] was appointed by the one who SAID to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.” And finally, in today’s Gospel reading from John, chapter 12, we hear, “Then a voice came from heaven [SAYING] “I have glorified it [God’s name], and I will glorify it again.”

Reflecting on these readings, several thoughts and a question arose. First, in the reading from Jeremiah, we hear God saying that this new covenant is about writing the law of God within us, on our very hearts. The word of the Lord, God’s law, is inscribed in our hearts. We *know* when we are doing God’s will, because it aligns with all that is best in our hearts — before that pesky mind starts talking and saying, “No, you can’t, because….”

In Psalm 51, after his confession and repentance, David goes on to say, “For behold, you look for truth deep within me and will make me understand wisdom secretly…Make me hear of joy and gladness…. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” Again, the truth, that right spirit, God’s voice, is within us.

And then there’s my question: what on Earth happened to those Greeks who came seeking Jesus? The answer is unclear, but the message is not: “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” Those Greeks looking for Jesus face a decision: to “see” Jesus, they must follow him. They must follow his teachings; they must hear God’s voice.

Have you ever heard God’s voice? That statistic (for which I couldn’t find a reference, by the way) that 90 percent of people in the world do hear God’s voice or that of spirits is followed by a question as to why we don’t. Rev. Kubicek states that it’s because we are too busy to listen, or too sophisticated, or that we fear being called (or actually being!) “crazy,” if we hear or admit to hearing a voice.

Hearing God’s voice requires time; it requires space. The requirement that I read about on the Church of the Saviour’s web site is an interesting one: to go on retreat each year, so that one can “listen more deeply to the still small voice of God.” I understand that this is about silent retreat—something that I will confess I’ve never done, mostly because of timing, but also because I’m probably just a little scared of what I might hear, although I think that God is speaking rather loud and clear nowadays.

Indeed, I would say that it’s rather difficult *not* to hear God’s voice in these times. Whether it’s climate change, war, hunger, poverty, or ill health, God is calling us to take action. This weary, increasingly devastated world needs us.

So perhaps the challenge is not about hearing the voice; it’s about knowing where to start. As Gordon Cosby is quoted as saying, “Every single one of us is significant to somebody else.” And that for this reason, we must respond to God’s voice both “out there” and right here. “The times a person says, ‘I must talk to you,’” or when speaking to a child, we have to respond in ways that communicate to the other that we walk the talk; that at all times and in all places, we carry ourselves as Christians. Whether we’re working to save a life in Gaza or in Georgetown or Germantown. I don’t know about you, but this is not easy when the child is screaming at you, or won’t get up to go to school, or won’t do their homework. But this is what we are called to do: to follow Christ at all times and in all places.

Going back to where I started, we are here as your guests today because of a desire to give thanks for a generous act of charity [here meaning *caritas* or *agape*], a concrete example of God’s love in action in the local community. And we look forward to sharing a meal with you, to being in community with you.

Too many people who call themselves Christians do not walk the talk; they don’t listen to God’s voice. Thank you for listening and for walking with us. Amen.