

The Voice of God: Thunder or Gentle Breeze?

Do you here voices? What do they say?

Those who have taken psychological exams for employment or in therapy will see these questions asked. Hearing voices suggests illness. In a former life as a nurse, I met people who were hospitalized for hearing voices and they truly needed help.

What if one is employed as a prophet? It would be expected to hear the question, "Have you heard God's voice?" or "What did he say?"

In today's last lessons of the Epiphany season, God appears to Elijah and to three of Jesus disciples unforgettably. They hear God's voice.

Other accounts exist in scripture:

There is the voice of God at Mt. Horeb to Moses when he received the Ten Commandments.

There is the voice of God at Jesus baptism.

And again on the mountain of Transfiguration, we hear read the words of the voice of God.

In what ways do we hear God's voice?

Thunder seemed to be a noisy way that God communicated to his people Israel and in later scriptures in Jesus' life. In the reading today, found in 1 Kings, Elijah seems to be undergoing a voice recognition test. God is about to pass by to see whether Elijah, his prophet can understand what God is saying to him. God uses nature: a strong wind comes by and it breaks rock and splits mountains – similar in experience to Moses on Mt. Horeb. *Yet God is not speaking in that wind.*

Next, nature test is an earthquake, but *God is not speaking overtly in the earthquake.*

Next, God uses fire to rouse Elijah's expectations but *God is not speaking through the fire.*

Is there any meaning here... in using these three aspects of nature? Do you remember the three basic elements believed by the ancients to make up the universe? Earth, Wind and Fire! They were the building blocks of the known universe.

Who was the pagan god of the wicked king Ahaz of Israel and his wicked wife Jezebel? Baal, the Lord and possessor. He was the sun god and the male fertility god. His name is associated with shame in Holy Scripture. In the eighteenth chapter Elijah had just had a debate with the prophets of Baal who worked for King Ahaz. The debate was centered in whose god was truly God! God won the debate in a very dramatic story... I commend to your reading.

In short Baal was deaf to his prophets and God had himself a barbecue when Elijah sent the invitation.

Back to the voice recognition test, God finally, after wind, earth and fire does the unexpected: there is a gentle breeze. Some Bibles say "a still small voice." Our reading reads "sheer silence." And after the silence, there is a voice that speaks with Elijah and gives him a set of orders on his next mission to Israel.

Let us hear Mother Teresa of Calcutta:

We need to find God and God cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature - trees, flowers, grass - grow in silence; see the stars, the moon, the sun, how they move in silence. Is not our mission to give God to the poor in the slums? Not a dead God, but a living, loving God. The more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life. We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us. All our words will be useless unless they come from within - words which do not give the light of Christ increase the darkness. (quoted in James Roose-Evans, *The Inner Stage* [Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1990], 130)

Do we hear God differently in this parish family of ours? You can count on it, as you can on the diversity of human beings! Is there still one Lord, one Faith and one Baptism? A resounding... Yes!

In the noise and clamor of being on the run for his life, Elijah needed to hear the comforting voice of God, in silence. The fireworks were there certainly. The thunder of a God who is both above nature as he is above culture, speaks with precision to his people.

Elijah, I believe, would not have been convinced if he sought God in nature. Today, we too are distracted by seeking God in culture and we are not convinced. God calls us to return to hear him in the inner silence of our souls. Yet for all too many of us, even our souls are too noisy.

What to do with the static? How can we tune in the "still small voice?"

Monk, David Steindl-Rast commends to us the Rule of Listening. He says, "By listening deeply to the message of any given moment, I shall be able to tap the very Source of Meaning and to realize the unfolding meaning of my life.

To listen in this way means to listen with one's heart, with one's whole being.... The daily discipline of listening and responding to meaning is called obedience.... The only alternative is absurdity. In Latin, *Ab-surdus* literally means *absolutely deaf*. I admit implicitly that I must become *ob-audiens* - thoroughly listening, obedient. (See his *A Listening Heart: The Art of Contemplative Living* [New York: Crossroad, 1983], 9-10)

I leave you with A Listener's Prayer by Sir Paul Reeves, at the WCC Seventh Assembly in Canberra, Australia:

God

*Grant me to be silent before you -
that I may hear you;*

*at rest in you –
that you may work in me;*

*open to you -
that you may enter;*

*empty before you -
that you may fill me.*

*Let me be still
and know you are my God.
Amen.*