

SERMON: The Voice of the Lord
TEXT: Psalm 29

1-9-22

A few years ago, I took a class in Mental Health First Aid. Someday I hope these classes will become as common as CPR training and basic First Aid. I believe it's just as important. One of the most memorable exercises we did was designed to demonstrate the auditory hallucinations experienced by persons who suffer from schizophrenia. With three people in each group, two of them would begin a conversation – small talk about the holidays or plans for the coming weekend. After the conversation began, a third person would begin to whisper in the ear of one of the others.

We were alerted ahead of time that this could be disturbing, and anyone who was nervous or hesitant about it could opt out. Well, it *was* very disturbing, and while some people laughed it off, others were clearly unsettled by it after only a few seconds. As the person who had another voice whispering in my ear, I found it to be very distracting and annoying. I had a hard time focusing on my conversation with the other person, and I wanted to tell the whisperer to stop. I was even tempted to slap it away. And as the person who was talking with

someone hearing the voices, I felt annoyed that she wasn't listening well and didn't have her full attention on our conversation.

It was a very simple, but also a very important and valuable exercise, helping me to gain some understanding of what those with schizophrenia are going through.

While it's nothing compared to schizophrenia, we all have some experience with a lot of different voices coming to us at the same time. There are voices of advice – solicited and unsolicited. There are demanding voices, judging voices, complaining voices, worried voices, bossy voices, whiny voices, threatening voices, arrogant voices. To be fair, there are also compassionate voices, encouraging voices, positive voices, and hopeful voices. And they all seem to get louder when we have important decisions to make.

As Christians, we are all hoping and praying to hear THE VOICE OF THE LORD. But with all the other voices around us, how do we recognize the voice of God? We'd like to think God's voice will be the comforting one, telling us

everything is alright, that we should relax, that there's nothing more for us to do. But that's not always true.

In fact, if we think back to Psalm 29, we will remember that the voice of the Lord thunders. It is powerful and full of majesty, breaking full grown trees and flaming with fire. It shakes the wilderness and strips the forest bare. It is full of glory and majesty and strength.

These descriptions of the voice of the Lord are not very comforting, and can be a little scary. I mean, thunder and fire and destruction? It makes me feel like the cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz. When the "great and powerful" Oz speaks, his voice is full of thunder and devoid of compassion, making the lion faint when summoned forward. Then, when the wizard has given his instructions and commands, "I said, Go!," the lion runs for his life down the hall and crashes through the window of the palace in fear.

Now, I imagine most of us are to the point where we believe in a loving God and we understand that the idea of "fearing" the Lord means that we have the

highest respect for God. It's more like that sense of awe you feel when looking at the Grand Canyon or the California redwoods or the ocean. It is something so amazing and overwhelming and unlike any other that renders us speechless and stops us in our tracks. And if you've ever felt or heard the call of God, you may well understand the fear of the unknown and the fear of not having the skill or the wisdom or the courage to answer – or even understand – the call.

The three scriptures we have heard this morning all refer to THE VOICE OF THE LORD. Psalm 29, of course, as I've already mentioned, describes the power of God's voice. But also, in the baptism of Jesus, we hear a voice from heaven declare, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And from the prophet Isaiah, we hear a voice of redemption and hope and love: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

Hearing THE VOICE OF THE LORD, of course, is not nearly as difficult as listening and following its commands. Not to mention discerning which among all the cacophony of voices around us is the voice of God.

Again, how do we know God's voice when we hear it? Well, certainly reading scripture can help us to learn about the call of God in history, whom God calls, and what God calls them to do. Being in community with other believers, worshipping together, studying God's word, serving and praying together can lead us to hear God's voice. And times of private prayer as well, times when we can sit in silence, away from all the other voices, can help us hear the still, small voice of God.

Finally, I want to share one of my favorite stories with you about listening for God's voice. Back when the telegraph was the fastest means of long-distance communication, there was a story about a young man who applied for a job as a Morse code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper, he went to the address that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large, noisy office. In the background, a telegraph clacked away. A sign on the receptionist's counter

instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office.

The young man completed his form and sat down with seven other waiting applicants. After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of the inner office, and walked right in. Naturally, the other applicants perked up, wondering what was going on. Why had this man been so bold? They muttered among themselves that they hadn't heard any summons yet. They took more than a little satisfaction in assuming the young man who went into the office would be reprimanded for his presumption and summarily disqualified for the job.

Within a few minutes the young man emerged from the inner office escorted by the interviewer, who announced to the other applicants, "Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has been filled by this young man." The other applicants began grumbling to each other, and then one spoke up, "Wait a minute. I don't understand. He was the last one to come in and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That's not fair."

The employer responded, “All the time you’ve been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse code: ‘If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours.’ None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did, so the job is his.”

It helps to know the one whose voice you’re listening for and the sort of message you will hear. May we listen well and hear and obey THE VOICE OF THE LORD to the glory of God!

AMEN.