

Listening and Hearing

Phil Togwell, on the devotional app Lectio 365 tells this story. He says, “Hearing and Listening are two different things. My middle daughter was profoundly deaf when she was born. When she was only 2 years old, surgeons fitted her first cochlear implant during a successful four and a half hour operation. However, our delight gradually gave way to disappointment as the months passed without her showing any signs of speaking. And then we met a therapist who have us hope again. ‘Your daughter can hear,’ she said. ‘We just need to teach her how to listen. When she learns how to listen, she will understand what she is hearing.’”

On this World Communion Sunday, there are so many voices calling for us to listen to them. It’s hard to know how to hear. Some days it feels like we are being barraged and attacked by all the voices that call to us from many sides:

The voices surrounding COVID 19 and the world pandemic.

The voices and concerns of our families and friends,

The voices of politicians on both sides.

The voices that call for justice and change and reform on many fronts.

Our own voices, speaking internally, with all that we are feeling and experiencing in these days of change upon change. So many people are speaking and we are hearing a lot, but what are we listening to?

On this World Communion Sunday, as we prepare to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion with our sisters and brothers around the globe, there are many voices calling out to us, many sides asking for our loyalty, many people asking for our trust, many diverse and sometimes divisive, voices asking us to hear them.

And into the midst of all these voices comes the beautiful poetry of Psalm 19 that tells of a voice that speaks to us without sound or speech, and yet tells us about the glory of God. The sky above, the stars, the moon, the sun that moves across the heavens each day, each without speech that humans can hear, without words that we know, speak to us about the power, the beauty, the love of our creating God. Without human words, creation’s messages about God go out around the globe.

We need this invitation from Psalm 19 in these days, to listen to all the ways that God speaks, not only in the guidance of Scripture, but also in the truths of creation.

In this time of many voices, maybe more than in any other time in recent history, Psalm 19 calls us to listen to the God who speaks to us all.

Father Gregory Boyle, who created Homeboy Industries, in Los Angeles, which is the largest gang intervention program in the world, writes books that are filled with stories that will change your life, as you read about the lives of the young men and women he walks beside, as they leaven gangs for new lives.

In his book Barking to the Choir, he tells the story of a young man he meets at Camp David Gonzales, one of the juvenile probation camps where he leads worship and says mass. One day when he arrives at this juvenile jail, he sees a young man he doesn't know standing alone, staring out at the Santa Monica Mountains. He goes up to the young man and asks him how he's doing.

"Well" the young man says, "I'm a little low on faith. You know what I do when I'm low on faith?"

Father Greg writes, I shake my head and lean in. My faith's gas tank has been known to hover at "E" so I wanted to know. The young man says "I stand right here and I look at them mountains, I stare at the blue sky and white clouds. I breathe in this clear air." He demonstrates all of this. "Then I say to myself, "God did this." He turns to me, with some emotion and an overabundance of peace, and says, "and I know everything will be all right."

That young man is a the 21st century psalmist whose words echo Psalm 19: "The heavens are telling the glory of God and the sky proclaims God's handiwork." As the voices of these days crash around us, may the Psalmist, and this young incarcerated man, call us outside into creation to listen to other voices.

This isn't nature for the sake of nature, but nature God has given to us to speak the messages of the creating, saving, expansive love of our God. When we learn to hear the voices of nature in the sky above us, we can listen for God's comfort and strength and know, with this young man speaking from behind bars, that "everything will be alright."

The apostle Paul was also surrounded by voices that spoke from many sides, and called for a variety of loyalties. In a land ruled unjustly by Rome, in a time when people of faith were battling with other people of faith because of the ways they followed Jesus, Paul wrote of his own life of faith. He wrote that he hadn't arrived

at perfect faith, but instead, “I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”

The God who created the many voices of creation, has come to us in Jesus with the gift of faith and eternal life. And Paul’s example invites us to press on in these days of many voices, to listen to the voice of Jesus who has made each of us his own.

On this World Communion Sunday, in this season of many voices, I have found another picture of letting creation speak to us in the voice of our God in Christ who claims us.

I find a lot of truth in children’s books. There is a great book by the Newberry Medal winner Sharon Creech. It’s called The Great Unexpected. In this book, one of the characters Lizzie, is a girl living with relatives in foster care, following the death of her parents. For two years she has hoped they will adopt her, but so far nothing has been said about it.

Lizzie tells her friend Naomi that sometimes she just needs to “go stand on the moon for awhile.” Naomi watches her look up into the sky, close her eyes and breathe deeply and then in a few minutes she would open her eyes and smile and say, “There. Much better.”

Naomi explains, “Lizzie said that if you imagined you were standing on the moon looking down on the earth, you wouldn’t be able to see the itty bitty people racing around worrying; you wouldn’t see the barn falling in or the cow stuck in the pond; you wouldn’t see the mean Granger kids squirting mustard on your white dress. You would see the most beautiful blue oceans and green lands and the whole earth would look like giant blue and green marble floating in the sky. Your worries would seem so small, maybe invisible..”

Naomi says, “I was going to have to practice that moon-standing more often because it was remarkable the change in Lizzie when she came back from the moon.”

This morning I want to borrow this wonderful image of “going to stand on the moon awhile<” as strong medicine for the living of these loud, many-voiced days. It is also a perfect way to celebrate World Communion Sunday with the whole world.

So, if you feel ready for a different perspective, I'm going to invite us to "go stand on the moon for awhile" right now. I invite you, if you choose, to close your eyes and take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Take another deep breath and exhale slowly.

Now let yourself, your chosen by Jesus in love self, with your eyes closed look up toward the sky. And then let yourself go stand on the moon.

As you stand on the moon, and look down toward the earth, look across the expanse of the heavens who show God's glory and "see the most beautiful blue oceans and green lands."

See the "whole earth...like a giant blue and green marble floating in the sky."

Now let yourself hear and listen to what the God who created you, the God who chooses you in Jesus, is saying to you right now.

Let yourself hear and listen to God, in this moment of silence, standing on the moon.

(silence)

Now, when you are ready, look once more at that giant blue and green marble and maybe borrow the words of that young man at Camp David Gonzales, and say "God did this!"

Then, when you are ready, give yourself a moment to come back into the space where you are sitting. Breathing slowly in and out, when you are ready, go ahead and open your eyes. As you settle back into your life here on earth, let yourself know that whenever you need to really listen, you can go stand on the moon awhile.

The God of the expansive, speaking universe, who makes us God's own in Jesus, is speaking the truths we need to hear.

Let us say with Lizzie: "There. Much Better." Amen.