

HEARING GOD*by Rev. Elaine Poproski*

Do you have voices in your head? I don't mean auditory hallucinations; I mean the kind of voices we accumulate over our lifetime from people who've influenced us for better or for worse. Maybe there's something your mom or dad used to say to you that you still hear them saying in your head when the circumstances call for it. Maybe it's one of those cliché's like, "If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you?" or "Shut the door! Were you raised in a barn?"

As a bit of a tribute to Mother's Day, today, I'd love to hear what your mom's voice in your head sounds like? What are some of the things your mom used to say (or still says) that you hear in your head even when she's not around. Take a minute to think and then unmute yourself to share.

Sometimes the voices in our heads are really positive. But sometimes they aren't. Sometimes they're the voices of people who bullied us growing up, telling us we're not good enough or we'll never amount to anything. Maybe you have a voice that tells you you're too fat or too skinny or that tells you you're stupid or that no one likes you. Maybe you have a voice that whispers that you're not as great as you think you are, and people are going to figure it out. I think most of us have experience with these kinds of voices in our heads. I know I do.

A bunch of years ago a song came out that was written by Steven Curtis Chapman and John Mark Hall and performed by a band called Casting Crowns. It's called [*Voice of Truth*](#). It starts with an allusion to the story of Peter walking on water. It asks what it would be like to have the kind of faith it takes to climb out of the boat and experience walking on water. And then it counters with these words:

But the waves are calling out my name and they laugh at me,
Reminding me of all the times I've tried before and failed.
The waves keep telling me, time and time again, "Boy, you'll never win!"

And then we get the chorus, which goes like this:

But the Voice of Truth tells me a different story.
The Voice of Truth says, "Do not be afraid!"
And the Voice of Truth says, "This is for My glory."
Out of all the voices calling out to me,
I will choose to listen and believe the Voice of Truth.

There's a second verse similar to the first, that alludes to the story of David and Goliath, asking what it would be like have the kind of strength it takes to stand before a giant. As with the first verse, we hear,

But the giant's calling out my name and he laughs at me,
Reminding me of all the times I've tried before and failed."

And again, in response, we hear the chorus:

But the Voice of Truth tells me a different story.
The Voice of Truth says, “Do not be afraid!”
And the Voice of Truth says, “This is for My glory.”
Out of all the voices calling out to me,
I will choose to listen and believe the Voice of Truth.

I want the words of this chorus to really stick with us, so I’m going to play it for you. Just the chorus.

Share Screen – play Voice of Truth chorus

This song has been important to me for a long time. When all those voices in my head start up, telling me I’m not good enough, or I’m a failure, or any of the other negative things that would derail me, I think about the Voice of Truth that tells me a different story.

That Voice of Truth is Jesus’ voice. It’s the voice of the Good Shepherd who loves the sheep so much, that if just one of them is lost, he’ll leave all the rest to go find that one. It’s the voice of the Good Shepherd who guards the sheep, leads them, provides for them, fights for them, even to the point of death if required.

The Voice of Truth tells us we’re loved, not because of anything we’ve done, but simply because we are. The Voice of Truth tells us we’re never forgotten, we’re never abandoned, we aren’t an accident or a mistake. It tells us we are wonderfully made, a child of God, free from condemnation, a citizen of heaven, light in a dark world.

The Voice of Truth counters all those other, negative, destructive voices we’ve picked up over the years. It longs to be heard. It longs to be believed.

Can you hear that voice? Have you learned to recognize it? to tell the difference between that voice and all the others clamouring for attention?

In John 10, Jesus was talking to a group of people who didn’t like him, who had set themselves up as the protectors of God and religion and holiness, and who were asking him for a straight-forward *yes* or *no* to the question of whether or not he was the Messiah, the one anointed by God to rule over God’s kingdom, bringing peace to the world. Jesus, by this point, was pretty exasperated by this group. He’d been doing all sorts of miracles and the like – things that were clearly consistent with the way their own Scriptures described the Messiah. But still they wanted clarity. They asked, “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”ⁱ

So Jesus told them plainly. He said to them, “I did tell you, but you did not believe.”ⁱⁱ And then he goes on to say that he didn’t just tell them, but that all the things he’s done also testify to who he is.

Why was it so hard for this group to hear Jesus? Why was it so hard for them to hear what he was saying or to hear the promises of Scripture evidenced by the things he did?

According to Jesus, at issue was the question of belonging. Jesus’ sheep – his disciples – belong to him and so they hear his voice – they listen to his voice – they know his voice. In other words,

they know who he is. But this group of questioners, they don't belong to him. And because they don't belong to him, they don't know his voice so they can't hear him – they can't listen to him. Not really. I mean, sure, they can hear him, literally. They aren't deaf. They hear the words coming out of his mouth. But they can't *hear* him. His words are just words, without real understanding. Because real understanding requires hearing more than just the words. It requires knowing the speaker well enough to understand the meaning behind the words. Or at least listening in such a way as to try to understand more than just the literal words.

Do you ever read things people have posted on the internet and shake your head at the stupidity of their words? Or maybe, if you're not quite as judgmental as I can be, you at least wonder what they could possibly be thinking that would make them write what they've written. I got caught in a web of comments related to a controversial article about COVID and vaccines and lockdowns and the like. I don't know what I was thinking that I started reading the comments. I should have learned better by now. But for whatever reason, there I was, reading some of the most ridiculous, hateful, judgmental, self-righteous things I've ever read. People who clearly have no background in science were writing all sorts of things with great confidence, even to the point of presenting as if they were experts in the fields of epidemiology, immunology, and all sorts of other things. No one was listening to anybody else. They were jumping all over what each other wrote, but they clearly weren't really listening. That's one of the biggest problems with the internet, isn't it? It's an avenue of self-expression that doesn't require real knowledge or dialogue or listening of any kind.

I think that might have been what the crowd of questioners around Jesus were doing. They were asking questions, but not because they really wanted to understand; they already had their minds made up. They were looking for a way in – a way to attack – some word or phrase they could grab onto and use to accuse him and get rid of him.

They say to Jesus, "Tell us plainly who you are." And Jesus responds, "I already told you. And I showed you. And you don't believe." He says it's because they don't belong to him. And I think what that means is that they had already made up their minds about him. They had already decided he was dangerous. They had certainly already decided that he wasn't the Messiah. As a result, they couldn't really hear what he said or see what he was doing.

I have these two cats. You know that. When they came to live with me, they were tiny little kittens, about 8-weeks old. And every time I came near them, they ran for cover. It took ages of sitting quietly on the floor for them to even venture near enough to sniff my leg. They were so afraid and nervous. Even though they'd never suffered a day in their short lives, even though I wanted nothing but good for them, they ran away. The sound of my voice sent them charging for cover. Now, a year and a half later, they know me, so they don't run away. They aren't afraid. When I talk to them (I know that's weird for those of you who aren't animal people) they stop and look at me as if they really do understand the words coming out of my mouth.

I think if Jesus were in our city today, he probably wouldn't have used all the sheep and shepherd metaphors he used. Maybe instead he would have talked about dogs and cats. Maybe he would have compared us to pets that know to whom they belong and to whom they don't belong.

This is what Jesus said about his sheep – his disciples: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Why is this listening – this hearing – so important? It’s important because it’s only in listening – in hearing Jesus’ voice – the Voice of Truth – that we can truly know who we are. We need to learn to hear his voice in order to counteract all the other voices clamouring for our attention and for the power to define us. But that’s not the only reason.

We need to learn to listen to Jesus’ voice because that’s how we follow him. The sheep of Jesus’ day didn’t generally all stick together in one place close to their shepherd. They meandered and wandered through the pasture. They probably regularly lost sight of the shepherd. Apparently, while sheep have amazing periphery vision, their distance vision isn’t very good. They can only see about 20 feet into the distance (that’s about 6 meters). They easily wander further than that from the shepherd when they’re grazing. So knowing the shepherd’s voice is essential. That’s the only way they can follow where the shepherd leads them.

Jesus said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” And then he said, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.”

This is, ultimately, where Jesus leads us. He leads us through death into life. Eternal life. But how can we follow him there if we don’t first know his voice? If we don’t first learn to listen to him and recognize when it’s him speaking?

The fact of the matter is, following Jesus isn’t just about following him through death into eternal life. That’s a huge piece of it, but it’s not all of it. Because we don’t wait to follow until death. We follow all through this life as well. In either case, though, following requires hearing. It requires listening – truly listening. The kind of listening that leads to understanding. The kind of listening that leads to knowing the speaker.

That’s what it takes to be one of Jesus’ disciples – one of Jesus’ followers. It’s not about just believing a set of facts about him. It’s about knowing him, recognizing his voice, listening to his voice, and following him. There’s a cyclical kind of nature to this whole knowing and following Jesus thing. It all probably starts with deciding to believe some things about Jesus. But from that point on, it’s about getting to know him. And as we get to know him, we learn to recognize and hear his voice. And as we recognize and hear his voice – the voice of one who knows us and loves us – we follow where he leads. And as we follow, we get to know him better. We get more accustomed to his voice. We get better at hearing him and we get better at following him. And the cycle continues.

This is why I’ve been talking about Spiritual Disciplines for the last four months. This is why people from the beginning of Christianity have practiced Spiritual Disciplines. Because they are tried and true tools that put us in a position to know Jesus better. To know God better. It was Jesus who said, “The Father and I are one.”^{iv} I don’t think he could have been plainer. When we know Jesus, we know God.

And when we know God, we hear what he has to say – we understand what he is saying. In the midst of a world with countless competing voices, all claiming to be the Voice of Truth, the only way we can reliably sort out which really is the Voice of Truth is if we know the one who is speaking. If we don't know God, we won't be able to separate his voice from all the others. And if we can't separate his voice from all the others, we can't follow where he wants to lead us, which is, ultimately, to eternal life.

Not only that. If we can't separate his voice from all the others – especially all those other voices in our own heads, we can't really know who we are. Because it's God who made us and so who knows us better than any other – even better than we know ourselves, no matter how self-aware we may be. If we're going to have any hope of silencing those other voices, of being freed from the hold they have over us, it's going to be because we get to know God and recognize his voice and listen to his voice.

That's the choice that is before us. Because getting to know God and learning to recognize his voice is a choice. It won't happen by chance. It won't happen automatically. We have to choose to know God. We have to choose to listen for his voice. I think that's one of the reasons I love that song, *Voice of Truth*, so much. The end of the chorus declares: "Out of all the voices calling out to me, I will choose to listen and believe the Voice of Truth."

And do you know what you'll hear as you learn to listen? As you learn to follow?

You'll hear that you are "fearfully and wonderfully made."^v That you bear the image of the Creator – of God.

You'll hear that you are known and loved.

You'll hear that you are valuable beyond measure. That you are worth going to the ends of the earth to be found. That your life is worth God's death.

You'll hear that you are needed and that there is a role for you in the world and in God's kingdom. That he has anointed you.

You'll hear that you are safe. That "no one can snatch you out of the Father's hand."^{vi}

You'll hear an invitation to rest, to be restored, to be filled with God's goodness.

You are known and loved by God. The choice before you is, do you want to know him? Will you make the choice to get to know him? Will you make the choice to learn to listen for his voice? Will you choose to hear him, to believe him, to follow him?

That's the question I'd love for you to consider this week. It may be that you've already considered and answered this question. If that's the case, then maybe spend some time considering if your life at the moment reflects that choice. Are you taking time to listen? Are you practicing whatever Spiritual Discipline you need to practice in order to get to know him better? What voices are drowning out God's voice right now? How are you doing at discerning the difference between God's voice and all the others clamouring for your attention?

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- ⁱ John 10:24.
 - ⁱⁱ John 10:25.
 - ⁱⁱⁱ John 10:27-30.
 - ^{iv} John 10:30.
 - ^v Psalm 139:14.
 - ^{vi} John 10:29.