

## ***“When You Begin to Hear Voices”***

Matthew 3:13-17

What are the voices in your head? To whom do they belong? And what are they saying?

Some of you are looking at me like I'm crazy.

You *do* hear voices don't you?

Now, before a rumor starts that “one of the pastors at Calvary Baptist Church has lost it,” let me explain.

Schizophrenics do hear voices...quite literally. They are called “auditory hallucinations.” This is perhaps most powerfully depicted in the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, when Mathematics Professor John Nash begins to both hear voices, and see the people themselves. While the movie has been criticized by some for not being completely medically accurate, it certainly helped me understand, better than reading any book or website, the mind and world of a schizophrenic...how the lines of reality and hallucination are not just blurred...they are one and the same.

I'm not schizophrenic. At least I don't think I am...I'm not sure one can self-diagnose that. *But* I do hear voices. And I'm willing to bet that you do too.

Here are some of mine:

*“Is that what you're going to wear?”*  
(my mother)

*“Don't say that word... 'nasty'...that is unrefined...”* (my father)

*“This is what we do.”* (my mentor)

*“If you make a mistake, just keep going...don't stop...”* (my piano teacher)

*“You deserve the best. Don't settle for less.”* (my best friend)

*“I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggoneit people like me...”*  
(Stuart Smalley) - just kidding! I don't hear Stuart Smalley in my head. But he made a fortune off of that mantra.

All of us have voices that ring through our minds and hearts. Sometimes it's a critical voice that is “learned” from a parent or a teacher...sometimes it's an encouraging word from a friend that we cling to and never forget. Sometimes the voices in our heads need to be retrained - or even tamed.

Peter Gomes, one of my preaching professors at Harvard, talked to us a

lot about “Jiminy Cricket.” That is...that we have to ignore the “Jiminy Cricket” that perches (right here) on our shoulder while we preach. We have to ignore him because he talks non-stop:

You should have worked longer on this sermon...Why does she always have a scowl on her face...You should skip that paragraph...I hope the organist will remember we’re changing our last hymn...Hmm there’s Mr. Smith he hasn’t been here in weeks...Is that feedback from my microphone?...You just used the wrong verb tense...I wonder if Bill and Judy will join today...

You get the picture. You can never completely shut off your Jiminy Cricket, but you can learn to ignore him when you need to and maybe even listen closely when he starts saying something worth paying attention to...like “there’s a game today, I better wind down this sermon.” You’ve trained me well on that one, Calvary.

We all hear voices. And what’s even weirder to think about: there is a high probability that you and I are the source of a voice that someone else is

hearing in their head! For good or for ill!

The Bible is full of people hearing voices. Which should give us some comfort. One of my favorite examples of this is when Samuel hears his name being called and thinks it is his priest, Eli, until Eli finally convinces him that it’s God’s voice he’s hearing and not his own.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it takes another person to help us figure out where a voice is coming from.

My all time favorite example of hearing voices in the Bible is from today’s text: “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,’ ” (v17). Mark and Luke’s versions put it in the second person, “You are my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”<sup>2</sup>

We have no reason to believe that this was a private message from God to Jesus. Especially in Matthew’s version...when the voice says “*This is my Son...*” clearly speaking not directly to Jesus but to all who are gathered. And these are not unfamiliar or unknown words...they come from Scriptures that these people would have known...it’s a combination of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1.<sup>3</sup> And to

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 3:1-10.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22

<sup>3</sup> M. Eugene Boring, “Matthew 3:13-17 Commentary” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A*

top it off, the voice corresponded with the appearance of a dove...making it even harder to ignore or write off as an auditory hallucination.

Today is The Baptism of the Lord Sunday on the church calendar, but in remembering Jesus' baptism, we also remember our own. And perhaps that voice that we first heard too. Do you remember that voice? Did you hear it today?

In re-reading this account of Jesus' baptism, we are reminded of the voice that is constantly playing in our hearts and in our heads...that of God.

Do you hear the voice of God in your life?

And if you do, is it the main voice, or just one among many others?

Baptism evokes so many things. We think about the way the water once broke in our mother's womb and we came to life. We feel reborn when we break the waters in the baptistery and breathe deeply of the Holy Spirit. We feel renewed even, ready to face the world with faith rather than fear. We die to our old ways of living, ways of preoccupied with ourselves and our own little orbits, and we are raised out of the baptismal waters to walk in newness of life...to walk into a life that is bigger than us...much much

bigger...and one where God's voice is impossible to tune out.

Now this re-birth is not always peaceful or picturesque...I've never given birth...but I'm pretty sure it's not always purely pleasant. The outcome is...but the process may not be. Like our first birth, the baptismal waters of re-birth can be rough, even if renewing and reorienting.

Yesterday during Modern Matures, Marge Connole shared with us a photo from 1938 of when her father was serving as a Baptist minister in Arkansas. Her father was standing on the left side of the photo. And there were twenty or thirty other people standing to his right...men and women, children and adults...of all ages. And at the far right, stood a strong, strapping young man. They are all holding on to one another. You can't quite tell it from the photo, but Marge says that all of these people were holding onto one another for *dear life*. That's because all of these people were standing in a river. The Current River, to be exact...which is aptly named, because apparently the current was so strong in that river that it wasn't uncommon for someone to get whisked away out from the arms of Marge's father while they were being baptized. So that strapping young man on the far right? His job was to go retrieve and rescue anyone who happened to get swept up

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*Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol VIII (Abingdon Press: Nashville), 1994, pg 160.

and away by the river. (We have it a little easier today!)

But - that's a pretty accurate picture of how we should be as the Body of Christ. Holding on to one another for dear life...rescuing each other when we get swept up and away. Because, there is no magic in the baptismal waters...they don't make our lives perfect...or stop all our problems. They have no power apart from the one in whose name we are baptized or apart from the witness of the community in which we are baptizing. But baptism hasn't always been understood this way.

In fact, we learn earlier in this chapter in Matthew, that John the Baptist practiced the "baptism of repentance." It was a washing ritual in which people would come back time and time again to start over, to do it right the next time. Did you notice that John didn't see any reason why Jesus needed to be baptized? Why should a sinless man need to do that? But Jesus takes baptism in a different direction; he re-interprets re-pentance.

To repent means to turn. **We usually think it means to turn away from sin; Jesus shows us how it means to turn to God. Holiness is not achieved when you stop sinning but when you start loving.**<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Modified from George Mason's sermon, *Baptismal Spa?*, given on 9 January 2005 at Wilshire Baptist

But how can you start loving unless you know yourself first to be loved?

Jesus response to John the Baptist's question is: Let it be so, NOW, for he (Jesus) is baptized to fulfill all righteousness. What could that mean?

What if it means that everything turns on that moment, that the old world is giving way to the new in Jesus; what if Jesus is filling full the world with the love of God that alone has the power to heal and make new? What if Jesus invites us to share in his baptism that way so that we can stop trying to retrieve something we feel like we're missing or to revive something in ourselves that is dead, but instead to be re-born the way we were born in the first place. We didn't have anything to do with it being born the first time; it was done to us. When we are baptized, we stop doing for ourselves: we die to ourselves, and we let God fill us full with the righteousness and love of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

If we learn anything from this scripture about Jesus' baptism, it is that we are God's beloved children...that we are chosen by God...and that God is well-pleased with us. Not well-pleased with us as God hopes us to be after baptism...but well-pleased with us...just as we

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Church in Dallas, Texas. Accessed on 8 January 2011 at <http://www.wilshirebc.org/article238935.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

are...at the moment of our baptism and in all the moments before and in all the moments to follow.

When we step into the waters of baptism, as four have done today...we do so because *we have begun to hear* the voice of God in our lives...in a profound way. When you step into the waters of baptism you do so because you understand that you are a beloved child of God...and that God is well-pleased with you. And when you hear that voice...and begin to truly comprehend it...you can't help but want to follow Jesus...to listen and learn from God's Son...and to re-orient your life toward his...to trust Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Baptism is a response to the love of God, not something we do to try to earn God's love.

Do you remember when you *began* to hear that voice of God? Perhaps it came through the voices of others...parents, Sunday School teachers, coaches, friends...but make no mistake...it was the voice of God. And it's a voice that is still speaking today. Do you still hear it?

If you've forgotten that voice...or if you've tuned it out...or if it's muffled under other critical voices that flood your life...begin to hear it again. Begin again - today - to hear - to listen - to the voice of God - to listen to God bless you, to call you beloved,

and to revel in the truth that God is pleased with you.

Hear it afresh now as this Gospel truth is movingly interpreted in Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible, *The Message*:

*Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptize him. John objected, "I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not you!" But Jesus insisted. "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." So John did it.*

*The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God's Spirit - it looked like a dove - descending and landing on him.*

*And along with the Spirit, a voice: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life."<sup>6</sup>*

You are God's child.  
Beloved.  
Chosen.  
Marked by God's love.

You are the delight of God's life.

When you begin to hear that voice all the time, you'll know that you've finally lost it.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 3:13-17

But being lost in God's loving voice -  
is really to find yourself found.

Amen.