

Voices We Hear and Expectations We Encounter

Friends, long-time and new: what a freedom we enjoy in gathering for worship this morning – two unique congregations manifesting together the body of Christ. We recognize that we are present on land that has been in relationship with people groups for millennia before us and, if current and future generations honor the Earth, then also for millennia beyond us. As we move into the part of our worship when we invite today's Scripture readings to illuminate our lives (nudging us in both challenging and encouraging ways), let us first pause to pray.

Spirit of God, Lover of creation, as we mediate on sacred texts from long ago, we trust you to breathe a fresh word into each of our lives and into the lives of our churches. Grant us courage to hold ourselves in a receptive posture – receptive to the truth of your love. Amen.

Fellow sojourners, whose voice resides in your head? Our brains hear many voices each day, but to whose voice have you found yourself listening in recent times – enough so that their voice has taken up residence in your mind and become an influence upon your thinking?

I'll invite us in a moment to name aloud (over and above the traffic noise) a few persons. We might hear from each other words like high school teacher, first boss, dad, mom, grandpa, aunt, sibling, best friend, neighbor, coworker, news pundit, senator, cashier. We likely each have a handful of voices residing in our minds. Which one or two come to mind when you fill in these blanks? I know what so-and-so would say about this decision I'm making. Or: I wish so-and-so were here to give me some advice. Or even: If I could just shake so-and-so's voice from my head, I'd be able to make up my own mind.

Instead of naming names, if you feel open to it, please share aloud the role of the person – my dad, my 4th grade teacher, etc. If you're reading, I invite you to raise your hand so we can hear each offering. Whose voices reside in your heads? [*mother, husband, mother and father, grandma, spouse, my children, grandpa*] We can keep pondering that as we meditate on words for today.

Thank you for sharing a sense of the variety of relationships we have with the voices in our heads. In a moment, we will return to wondering about the balance among the voices who most influence us. For now, let's listen again to excerpts from our brief dramatic reading from Ezekiel. We heard:

"The Voice said, 'Mere mortal, stand up, and I will speak with you!' As it spoke, spirit entered me and raised me onto my feet, and I heard these words: 'Mere mortal, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that revolted against me... And you are to say to them, "Thus says Sovereign God!" And whether they listen or they don't... they will know that a prophet has come among them.'"

Ezekiel lived as a prophet among the people of Israel while they were in exile in Babylon. The Babylonian army had attacked the city of Jerusalem and captured many of the people, forcing them to migrate to the faraway land of Babylon. **I wonder: have you ever longed to hear God's voice speaking directly to you when people you love or you yourself are suffering?** Would we be receptive to that Spirit (*ruach* in Hebrew, meaning wind or breath) challenging us when we already feel strained by life circumstances?

Essentially, the Love of God was calling Ezekiel to a multiply difficult task. First, he needed to be open to recognizing the Voice as true and good – as God's own breath.

Then he needed to clearly recognize that his people, in the midst of trauma, were losing their way of trust and devotion to the law of Love. Finally, Ezekiel needed to be willing to confront his people in their unmoored state, challenging them to repent – that is, to turn around and find their way back into rhythms of trust and devotion to God’s love.

Again, I wonder: are we (as persons gathered here today from our individual lives, from each of our churches, and as citizens in the St. Croix Valley) ready to be receptive to the Voice of God’s Spirit (*ruach* – wind, breath) challenging us to do the work of Love – even when we are already strained by the realities in which we live?

I am intrigued by the confidence the Voice expresses regarding how the people would know that Ezekiel was a prophet (one who articulates God’s truths) regardless of whether or not they heed Ezekiel’s call to repentance.

We’ve wondered what it might be like to wear Ezekiel’s sandals. What if we are in the place of the rebellious nation? What if God’s loving Voice (Spirit’s breath) is reaching out to you in this moment in your life through one who is willing to tell you hard truths? Let’s listen to an excerpt again, placing yourself within the passage as the one who needs to listen to a prophetic voice. We hear:

“Mere mortal... I am sending you to [insert your name]... they have been rebelling against me to this very day... defiant and stubborn. And you are to say to them, ‘Thus says Sovereign God!’ And whether they listen or they don’t... they will know that a prophet has come among them.” **Don’t we long to hear a Voice of tough, wise love in the midst of all the voices we already listen to?**

Yet, I wonder: do we actually welcome the voices of those who care enough to speak into our lives with the grit of tough, wise love? I invite you to consider utilizing a simple tool I've developed when working with couples through premarital counseling. I call it "pies of influence." In the coming days, you would draw a circle. Bring to mind all voices who influence your thinking and decision-making. Give each voice an accurately sized slice of your pie of influence. Be sure to include a slice for the Love of God and a slice for your own intuition. The rest of your slices may be categorical (like family, friends, political leaders, authors) or they may bear particular names of persons in your life.

And as a way of contemplating how you might need to make changes to your current pie of influence, I encourage you to then draw a second circle to represent your ideal pie of influence. Give yourself time to consider. To which voices do you need to give less power to influence you? Which voices would you like to have greater influence in your thinking and decision-making?

Whether you see yourself more clearly in Ezekiel today (called to speak truth more boldly to someone in whose life you have influence) or you see yourself more clearly in Israel today (hurting, lost, yet capable of repentance and change), know that the breath of God is within you to sustain you. *[pause as the St. Charles' Catholic Church bells rang]*

Our neighbors joined us right at an ideal juncture. Let's turn now to the gospel reading for today. Jesus' elders and peers' struggle with a mismatch between new information flooding them in real time (that is, Jesus presenting as a wise, articulate teacher) and the expectations they had built from past experience (that is, Jesus as one of their own to be nurtured within well-worn societal patterns). We heard:

“Jesus came into his own town... When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and the many listeners were astonished and said, ‘Where did he learn all this? What is this wisdom that has been granted...? Isn’t this, the carpenter, the son... the brother...?’... They found these things to be stumbling blocks... Their lack of faith astounded [Jesus].”

I love that Jesus’ faith was so strong that he would be astounded by his neighbors’ lack of faith. I am so not astounded by their lack of faith. It totally resonates with me. I may have been disappointed or hurt when witnessing such a conflict between expectations and reality (but not likely astounded).

Have you recently found yourself in Jesus’ shoes, stung by an experience in which someone who you know cares about you will not soften their assumptions about you and their expectations for your life enough to accept you as you are and as you are evolving?

Have you recently found yourself in Jesus’s elders’ and peers’ shoes, shocked by new information about the character, capacity, or personhood of someone about whom you care deeply – and struggling to weave the new information into the assumptions and expectations you’ve been holding about that person?

How did Jesus respond to the lack of receptivity within his community of origin to his evolution as a rabbi? He named it and then moved forward. He said, *“Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometowns and among their own relatives and in their own households.”* Personal evolution can be lonely work. Yet we can choose to surround ourselves less with people who contribute to our sense of loneliness and more with people eager to meet or re-meet us as we are and as we are becoming.

Jesus refocused toward the work at hand. We heard: *“Then Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out in pairs... And Jesus said to them, ‘Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town. Any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you leave it, shake off the dust from the soles of your feet as a testimony against them.’”*

Jesus seemed to hear the same Voice that spoke to Ezekiel. People may or may not receive what we offer. *Ruach* (the breath or wind of God) accompanies each loving move – helping it land somehow, somewhere.

Finally, we heard this: *“So they set off, proclaiming repentance as they went. They cast out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.”* What isn’t said but I would bet money also occurred was this: ‘And they were rejected in some places and shook off the dust from the soles of their feet many times.’ Rejection can be so painful. We would do well to talk more in caring company about our experiences of rejection.

Friends, may we surround ourselves with those who long to see us as we are and receive the gifts we offer.

May we learn to hold more lightly those relationships which siphon more life energy than they add to our lives.

May we wisely discern who gets how much of our pie of influence.

May we hear and share the Voice of windy, life-giving *ruach* because God’s Love is counting on us. Amen.

July 7, 2024
St. Croix United & Bethlehem Lutheran @ Village Green
Ezekiel 2:1-5, Mark 6:1-13