

Hearing God's Voice

Lessons from a Beginner
By Steve Stuckey

The year was 1958. My elementary school launched a new music program. The music teacher, Mr. Smith, trolled through my fifth grade class looking for recruits. We all



volunteered because it got us out of Social Studies for two hours each week. On the first day of class, Mr. Smith, a long suffering man, met with each one of us individually to help us select an instrument to play. I remember him looking at me and saying, "Long arms! How would you like to play the trombone?" I said, "Yes." So began the process of learning about notes, slide positions, and becoming a musician.

A few weeks later the orchestra gathered together for the first time. On that day I was introduced to a mysterious ritual that baffled me for years to come. At the beginning of each orchestra session, Mr. Smith called for a moment of complete silence. He played a note on the piano. Then starting with the brass section, he had each of us play the same note. He listened for a moment and then mumbled, "sharp" or "flat." Then he told us to adjust the

tuning slide on the top of our horn by pushing it in or out by a quarter of an inch. Once he was satisfied with the sound, he moved on to the next person in the orchestra. It seemed that half of the session was spent tuning the band.

I spent three years in Mr. Smith's orchestra. Each began the same way. In every class I wondered,

"What is he listening for?" The noise from the piano and every other instrument in the room always sounded the same to me regardless of the adjustments he made. My ear was not sensitive enough to distinguish more minute differences in pitch.

It was clear to me that the piano was the grand authority in the room. Our job was to conform our sound to that singular voice.

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When we were able to do that, the room resonated with a crystal clear tone. When we were not able to do that (which was more often the case) the air vibrated with a dissonant noise. In the early years I could never hear the difference, but over time, my sense of hearing

improved. I learned to rely upon the advice of my fellow trombone players who were older and more experienced. I trusted Mr. Smith's ear. And I kept practicing. I can't explain when or how I learned to hear pitch more clearly. But slowly a knowledge came to me that I could sense though not describe. My sense of pitch is by no means perfect, but it is better than it was in 1958.

Hearing God's Voice

If ever there was a mysterious process, hearing God's voice takes the cake. How does one hear the voice of The One who is invisible and rarely uses sound waves to communicate with his creatures? How do we hear the Voice of One who is grand in wisdom and power beyond all our comprehension? How do we distinguish His Voice from all the other voices of authority (parents, culture, and our own self-serving ego) that rumble through our brains? Our ancestors all the way back to Adam and Eve, have wrestled with these same questions. I have been trying to listen to the voice of God off and on (more off than on) for the past forty years. Never have I had perfect certainty that what or who I heard was the one and only true God of heaven and earth. I struggle to distinguish the true sound of wisdom from my own sounds of dissonant confusion. But I know something in my soul that I did not know before. I don't know how this sense of pitch to what I believe to be

God's voice came to me but the following has been helpful.

Perfect Pitch

Only one person in the history of our species ever had perfect pitch to God's voice. That was his son Jesus Christ. We would do well to listen to him if we want our own sense of hearing to improve. Luke 3:21-23 is a story of hearing God's voice. It reads:

²¹When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²²and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Thirteen English words reverberate from the heavens. They speak of the Son's identity, and the Father's abiding love and affirmation. Jesus feasted upon them in the depths of his soul as the Spirit led him into the desert for forty days of testing. Those words still rang in his mind as he hung on a cross three years later. During his three short years of formal ministry, he never lost the ability to distinguish the Father's voice of love from the cacophony of misplaced expectations, opposition, and rejection that he heard from



The Temptation of Jesus- Rembrandt

those around him. Those words grounded his life in the soil of God's love. And they were spoken not only for Jesus but for our sake as well. We too are loved by God the Father, Son, and Spirit. We are invited into their holy family and our God takes pleasure in our presence.

A Moment of Silence

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. Luke 4:1-2

In our extroverted 24/7, over stimulated, noisy culture it is increasingly difficult for God's people to hear his voice. Jesus, along with the prophets before him and the saints to follow, learned that the desert was a place to discern the voice of the Lord in their life. The desert is a place of solitude and silence. Productivity ceases. To survive we must slow down. The spacious landscape offers little to distract our attention. The vast empty space can give our cramped souls room to expand. Visible reality loses power and we are able to see invisible reality more clearly. We need not drive to Death Valley. A quiet corner of a room can become a quiet place to listen for a few minutes each day. A library, park, or retreat center offer space for an extended time each month. Even more important than a physical place is space in our schedule. The time must be planned well in advance.

Luke tells us that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert and there he was tempted by the devil. The

word tempt is from the science of metallurgy and it refers to a process of testing that results in the metal becoming stronger. The testing that Jesus faced was to discern between the voice of God and the subtle enticements of the devil. If he was to be successful in his mission of laying down his life to save our world, he had to stay on course and remain united to the Father moment by moment. The first Adam failed to hear God correctly. The second Adam could not afford to make the same mistake.

The Grand Piano of Authority

⁴Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'



The devil challenged Jesus three times and on each occasion, Jesus quoted a passage from scripture. God's holy written Word is God's clear voice for us in this world. Jesus had meditated upon and memorized it. By it he was able to discern true and false. By it his faith in the Father was fed. By it hope was renewed and his soul was energized.

Evangelical spirituality insists that in order to hear God's voice we must immerse ourselves in the scriptures on a regular basis. The forms of immersion can vary- inductive Bible Study, manuscript study, memorization, Lectio Divina, reading through the Bible, liturgical recitation-

all help. What is needed is a love and discipline to keep at it through the seasons of life. In time clarity of wisdom will emerge like a solid clear tone.

Dissonant Pitch- Accepting Our Sour Notes

The problem that I had as a young musician was that I could never hear my own out-of-pitch sound. I was off key but so was everyone else around me. Besides we were not thinking about pitch. We were focused upon loud and soft noise (mainly loud). When I got to high school, marching was added to the musical experience. I was more interested in avoiding horse pucky in a parade than in matching my tone to the true sound. So I never learned to hear dissonant pitch. By the way, my band instructor solved the problem in my senior year by exchanging my trombone for a whistle and making me the drum major.



Temptation in the Desert- Janknegt 1990

As Christian leaders, however, we can not afford to avoid dissonant voices that rumble through our souls. Parker Palmer uses the metaphor of light and shadow and puts it this way. *If we do not understand that the enemy is within, we will find a thousand ways of making someone "out there" into the*

*enemy, becoming leaders who oppress rather than liberate others... Leadership is hard work for which one is regularly criticized and rarely rewarded, so it is understandable that we need to bolster ourselves with positive thoughts. But by failing to look at our shadow, we feed a dangerous delusion that leaders too often indulge: that our efforts are always well intended, our power is always benign, and the problem is always in those difficult people whom we are trying to lead.*¹

*It is so much easier to deal with the external world, to spend our lives manipulating material and institutions and other people instead of dealing with our own souls. We like to talk about the outer world as if it were infinitely complex and demanding, but it is a cakewalk compared to the labyrinth of our inner lives!*²

In Luke 4 Jesus is led into the desert where he engaged the devil. The shadow of darkness tempted him with the same offers that his followers have faced since the dawn of time. On two occasions, the devil began with the phrase, "If you are the son of God." It is a challenge to his identity. He was taunted to prove his position and relationship with miraculous power.

Parker Palmer says that when leaders are insecure about their identity and worth, they sometimes develop an extroverted personality as a way to cope with their self doubt. They plunge into activity to prove that they are worthy. He

¹ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, Jossey Bass, 2000, page 80-81

² Parker Palmer, *ibid*, page 82

goes on to say "that when we are insecure about our own identities, we create settings that deprive other people of their identities as a way of buttressing our own."³

Behind our self-doubt there often lurks an image of God that is harsh and critical. That image may require us to prove our worthiness. For example, I carry on a running conversation with someone in my head trying to convince that I use my time in a wise and effective manner. For years I thought that the being in my brain was God. But as I have listened and reflected on Scripture, I have concluded that the image is more often of my own making.

Jesus, on the other hand, was secure in the Father's love and affirmation. That security was the source of his power. On the journey from the Jordan to Jerusalem he was able to wait upon His Father to provide what he needed. And he was able to freely give himself to others rather than use others to satisfy his own ego needs.

If self-doubt is one out-of-tune sound in our heads that must be distinguished from the true voice of the Father, self inflation is another. Many of us in leadership live with the unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen. This sound is called functional atheism.

This shadow causes pathology on every level of our lives. It leads us to impose our will on others, stressing our relationships, sometimes to the point of breaking. It often

³ Parker Palmer, *ibid*, page 86

*eventuates in burnout, depression and despair, as we learn that the world will not bend to our will and we become embittered about that fact.*⁴

When I talk to Christians who act as if everything depends upon them, I often discover people who have become disconnected from their physical bodies and emotional selves but don't know it. They may use activity to bury their feelings of disappointment, sadness, fatigue, or longing. But our gracious God does not want us to hide our true selves from Him. He invites us to bring all of our sounds to his music room.

The Role of the Orchestra

Because of my limited abilities, I spent most of my musical career stuck in third chair. The score was not as complicated and the notes not as high as the people who played first trombone. My best friend, however, played first chair trombone and he eagerly helped me tune my instrument or figure out a difficult piece when I asked him.

So it is with hearing God's voice. In addition to making space to listen, immersing ourselves in Scripture, discerning the voices of our shadow side, we also need others who know us well to help us hear. I am an introvert by nature and I tend to trust my own instinct above the opinion of others. But my instinct has failed me on a number of occasions so as I have gotten older, I have learned to include others in my decision making processes. When I am trying to make an important decision, I often ask my wife and a few

close friends for their counsel. I have grown to trust their advice. I look for collaboration between their words, the words of Scripture, and my own instinct as I seek the pathway ahead.

We are created for community and we hear God's voice in the midst of his people. This was true even for the lonely prophets of old. They usually had a companion or a company of prophets that helped them discern the ways of the Lord.

The Dawning of Awareness

Knowing the voice of the Lord is not like listening to a telephone call. If only it were that easy. For me the experience is more akin to the dawning of a new day. When the first rays of light filter through the morning mist, the sky turns ever so slowly from a deep blackness to a dark grayness. The still air seems to take on a hopeful expectancy. Gradually the gray becomes softer and lighter. Then a lonely little bird will announce daybreak and suddenly his friends will join him in song for the new day. Though the sky may still be dark and the stars shining, night is over and a new day has begun.

As my ears became more attuned to God's voice, I found myself feeling less alone. I had a sense that a silent benevolent force was present. It felt spacious and good. I noticed that I felt more grateful for the little things of life- flowers, smiles, and children playing. Scripture reading captured my attention more. The Word had a new energy that I had not detected before. Prayer felt more comfortable. For some reason I was less concerned about saying

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the right words and more concerned about simply being present and attentive. The causes that I gave myself to seemed more important, though my role in the cause seemed less necessary.

This change has happened very slowly over many years. Hearing God speak is filled with such wonder and mystery. Tuning my life to his music is a life long effort. Celtic Spirituality speaks of our need to attune the "five string harp of our senses to the presence of God."⁵ As we learn to do that we become more aware of the Spirit's divine activity in and through us.

Dallas Willard calls this awareness *The Way of the Burning Heart*. In the forty days following his resurrection, Jesus prepared his disciples for the time when he would be with them but invisible. On one occasion he appeared to two of his followers walking on the road to Emmaus. A few hours later when the two were debriefing the experience, they said. "Did not our hearts burn within us on the road as he talked to us and explained the scriptures?" Luke 24:31

Willard says, "*They were recalling that his words always*

⁴ Parker Palmer, *ibid*, page 88

⁵ Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Director, Spiritual Companion*, Paulist Press, New York, 2001, page 182

*affected their 'hearts' their inward life, in a peculiar way and that this had been going on for three years. No one else had that effect on them. So they were asking, 'Why did we not recognize him from the way his words were impacting us?' The familiar 'Jesus heartburn' had been a subject of discussion among the disciples on many occasions."*⁶

How do the words
of Jesus affect our
hearts?

Resonate Power

At the conclusion of Jesus' time in the desert, Luke says:

¹⁴Then Jesus filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

In music, when two sounds are matched in pitch, the air resonates with a stronger, fuller melody. The notes are bright and clear. Father, Son, and Spirit were perfectly in tune when Jesus returned to Galilee and his human body resonated with the majestic power of God.

Everyone who saw him was in awe. That same resonant sound is offered to us as well because Jesus promises to be with us.

The Apostle Paul prays:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that

you, being rooted and established in love may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:16-19

Amen

⁶ Dallas Willard, In Search of Guidance, Harper Collins, 1993, page 238