

Who do we listen to?
July 2, 2023. Rev. Dr. David Thompson

In 1934, a German magazine ran a story about a pilot using only his breath to fly a new invention. The photo showed the man blowing into a box and soaring above the ground. And he was wearing skis to help make a safe landing. The story and photo made its way to the United States. But there was one key piece of information that didn't make it – the fact that the whole story was an April Fools' gag. Several American newspapers shared the "news" about the amazing lung-powered machine without realizing it was all a joke.

Text:

"The word of the Lord came to Elijah and said; "Go out, and stand on the mountain before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice."

So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. Suddenly a voice came to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

On July 17th 2009 the former news anchor of CBS, Walter Cronkite passed away at the age of 92 in New York City.

President Barack Obama said at the time: "He was someone we could trust to guide us through the most important issues of our day, a voice of certainty in an uncertain world. He was family. He invited us to believe in him and he never let us down."

In 1972, he was called the most trusted man in America with a huge following, which surpassed the President, the vice President and congress, and all other journalists combined. He spoke authoritatively of Vietnam and Watergate so much so that when he spoke of Vietnam, President Johnson said, "If I have lost Cronkite I have lost Middle America."

There has been no one to take Cronkite's place and I think that is because the whole world has gone through a sea change since his era.

Today there is an ocean of information on the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, much of it chaotic, and there are no guides for us as to how to handle it all. For instance, currently, Evangelicals in the United States have been exposed to disinformation in the social media over vaccines. One New York Times report says that:

Stephanie Nana, an evangelical Christian in Edmond, Okla., refused to get a [Covid-19](#) vaccine because she believed it contained "aborted cell tissue."

Nathan French, who leads a nondenominational ministry in Tacoma, Wash., said he received a divine message that God was the ultimate healer and deliverer: "The vaccine is not the saviour."

Thus, millions of evangelicals refused vaccination, putting the entire nation at risk and making herd immunity a desperate and perhaps unattainable quest.

Perhaps you have noticed that news has become an interactive two-way street? We live today in the era of many voices insisting to be heard. Los Angeles critic Robert Lloyd said of today that it is not the old voice of reassuring honesty that we cultivate, **but one of perpetual anxiety.**

We live in the era where no one can speak for us all anymore. If you have a cell phone, I phone or I Pad, a laptop or a desk computer, you can plug in to the whole planet and have your say, but who is listening? And who do **you** listen to anymore in the plethora of voices?

I wonder first of all whether it was an illusion that we loved in Cronkite: the idea, whether it was true or not, that someone could distil for us the world and make some kind of sense of it in just a half an hour. In Canada Peter Mansbridge filled that role of a trusted news anchor. That was reassuring somehow. But I believe now that that reassurance has long gone. As one newspaper editor said: "What room is there for the conscience of a nation...even trust, at least in the public realm, seems an uneasy notion...in an age of wholesale, instantaneous, unprecedented lying, trust is something that may not be wise, when it comes to evaluating our sources of information."

And that is what I want to talk about today. What voices do we listen to? How do we tell when a voice is lying to us?

On the personal level how do we know what is right or wrong or who to listen to?

In the time of Jesus, there is no doubt that the disciples of Christ went to him as an authority that could be trusted. Peter said, "To whom else should we go? You have the words of eternal life."

For many devout Catholics the Pope is a figure of authority, a voice that they listen to. For Buddhists it is what the Dalai Lama says and it is the same for all religions, which have holy books. The voice of God is found for them in their scriptures and sometimes in their leaders.

Today however, we live in an era of religious pluralism where there are a multitude of authorities and voices. If on the communications media there is a cacophony, just what do we think has happened when it comes to religious authority?

Times have changed for every religious community. Today Christians, Muslims, Jews and many other religions are divided amongst themselves each claiming that they have the truth. Within the faiths there are the same divides of liberal and conservative, fundamentalist and mainstream, violent and pacifist. The news, the Internet, our education opens us up to all of these voices like a vast smorgasbord. Which one do we follow, if any?

I think that all of us try to internalize a picture of the world in our minds and try to make sense of it.

Here is the good news:

What we are discovering today, in the cacophony of voices, is that **there is perhaps still, one trustworthy voice we can pay attention to: It is the voice within us, that many religions and psychologies refer to as the conscience, or the Holy Spirit of God speaking within us.**

In the Old Testament tradition, we have a great resource about this voice of God within. How do we recognize this voice as authentic, according to the Old Testament?

When the prophet Elijah was at the far end and running for his life, he had an experience of God speaking to him. The Lord was not in a great wind, not in an earthquake, not in a fire but in a still small voice, a murmuring...

Isaiah speaking of the same inner voice says: "God will be gracious to you when you cry; when he hears he will answer you. When the Lord has given you the bread of suffering and the water of distress, he who is your teacher will hide no longer...When you turn to the right or the left your ears will hear these words behind you; This is the way, go this way."

In the New Testament tradition, the same inner voice of God is referred to in this way: "The Holy Spirit will witness with our spirit to lead us into the truth." So according to these traditions the voice we are all looking for is not in some **external** authority, **but a voice within us.**

That said, what about Nathan French, who leads this aforementioned nondenominational ministry in Tacoma, Washington, saying that he received a divine message that God was the ultimate healer and deliverer: "The vaccine is not the saviour."

For many scientific experts to refuse the vaccine is foolish in the extreme and will result in thousands of unnecessary deaths as the stats show it has. Who do we believe? A Nathan French with no scientific qualifications, but who claims that he has a direct line to God on Vaccines, or do you believe the science?

Question: How do we deal with folks who teach that God speaks to them and then when we look hard at what is said, supposedly by a rational all encompassing Divine mind, it is unfortunately, patent nonsense?

Perhaps the best clue to answer this question that I have found, is that the New Testament states that the Holy Spirit of God, witnesses with our spirit to lead us into the truth. Thus, if we think we hear the voice of God, **we have to test that.** As 1 John 4, verse one says: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world."

When we believe that something is true, we need to see if that so called truth we are considering, **actually sets us free or binds us up! As Jesus said the truth shall set you free. Freedom is the acid test of the truth. When we believe something that is wrong, we get bound up in difficulties. Truth however sets us free again.**

So, we can always recognize the voice of God because the truth always sets us free and lies always bind. If we think we are listening to the voice of God and get all bound up we can know we are delusional.

There are also other voices within. We have addictions. The addicted self has a strong voice inside our heads as well as our real self. There are other voices as well like the voices of our dead parents and grandparents, our school teachers and our friends or anyone who is an authority figure for us. Thus, in this inner swirl there can also be a cacophony. Here are some of these voices:

"You lost your temper today!"

"You should have spent more time with your family."

“You blew it. You messed up. You can’t do anything right. You are just a failure.”

“ You look ugly today. That lipstick color is wrong.”

“ I’m getting too fat.”

If this goes on, all the time in your head, and you listen to these voices without defense, I think that you may end up getting depressed and sick. Certainly, these voices are not the voice of God within.

In order to hear the voice of God we **have to stand up to these voices and answer them back**. They are at the best half-truths and lies and so you need to answer them with the truth that frees.

When the voice says, “you shouldn’t have said that” we can say: “Yes that is right but I have forgiven myself and learned an important lesson.” When the voice accuses you of a business failure in the past we can say “Yes that was in the past. I have learned from my mistakes and turned the page and I am in a whole new chapter now. I am moving on! And this day before us is a great day for starting again!”

Every time we truly forgive someone, we can silence a troublesome voice within. Every time we forgive **ourselves**, we can shut up that inner whiner.

We can refuse to listen to these negative voices anymore. They are the monkey chatter of failure, of being too busy and of low self- esteem. Let’s clear the decks, open our minds and hearts to God, who speaks to us through our conscience!

How do we tell the difference between these voices and the voice of God within?

If the voice of God is speaking to us it will be a voice of grace, mercy, peace, love, kindness, gentleness and because this voice speaks truth, these truths shall set us free. If following the voice ends up bidding us up in shackles, we can know for sure that it is not the voice of God. Deep down we will realize that we may have silenced the true gentle murmur within, that the Hebrew prophets talked about **and created our own God...**

Knowing that, and asking the real God for help, is the way out of that prison.

Jesus said: “Ask and it will be given to you, seek and ye shall find, knock and the door shall be opened to you.” The Old Testament scriptures teach us that God is the Rewarder of those who diligently seek him.

One of the amazing positive developments of our time since we have lost the single authoritative voices that we all used to heed, is that we are more open than ever to hear our own inner voices and the voices of formerly insignificant others, like children.

For instance, not so long ago, children were to be seen and not heard. My Paternal grandfather used to say to us children when at the table. “Silence!” and we children sat there in silence for the meal while the adults talked!

But today more than ever children can be voices that we listen to! As I pointed out last week, God can speak through a child.

Today the truth can come from anywhere! Anyone can make a sudden difference.

In 1967 when Cronkite was on the influence throne in America, Detroit city however was torn up with riots and violence- arson, vandalism, gunfire, fistfights. There were protests about Vietnam, Women’s movements on feminism being resisted by men, black Americans who were breaking out of the chains of segregation.

Carl Andreas, a peaceful auto worker and non- violent Mennonite recalled ‘our city was dying...everywhere you looked you could see fires, smoldering rubble, burned out hulks of buildings where somebody’s business or home once stood.’

Over dinner one night the Andreas's young 11-year-old boy had an idea that they should make a sign and hang it in their window. It read, "This house is unarmed."

They hung it in their living room window clearly visible from the street. The Andreases wanted to send a non-violent message. Despite some fears expressed by neighbors the signs started to proliferate. The Andreases printed some dozen or so more and they gave them out to their friends. And so, the message spread a little more.

"Some of us saw them and made our own," said the Rev. Nancy Doughty.

Eventually one of the progressive churches took up the idea and printed several hundred.

That inspired idea then became a movement.

As Erik Kolbell wrote: "All reports indicate that none of the houses that bore the signs were touched by so much as a scintilla of the violence."

Here is the lesson as Erik Kolbell saw it: "We so often believe that great ideas can only come from great leaders, that effective protest can only be driven by saints. How inspiring to realize that any one of us has the ability to imagine a workable solution and can turn that idea into powerful action.

And in this case a child's simple idea gave protection and helped restore peace to a violence torn city.

Things have changed since 1967 and the time of Cronkite. Now anyone of us listening to the voice of God within can literally change the world, as that 11-year-old boy did in Detroit.

So, who do we listen to?

God has placed God's own voice within us from the dawn of time. It is more urgent than ever that we listen to God- that still small voice that does not lie to us, ever!

It is not in the winds of mass media coverage, or in the earthquake of mountains of information, or in the fire of disinformation that wreaks havoc everywhere it is spread; no, it is not in these places that we find guidance and reassurance, but in the still small voice; a gentle murmuring of mercy and love within us, that we have come to recognize as the voice of God.

That voice heard within us can free us to build a better Canada, a better world for our children's children...a world the prophets saw as possible-where justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream, where swords are turned into ploughshares and where we shall not make war anymore.

Amen.