

## Voice Recognition

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Sunday, May 12, 2019

Isaiah 49:8-18/John 10:22-30

Two weeks ago, in a doctoral class I was teaching at Hartford Seminary, one of my favorite students was talking about some issue she was having in her church. She is the only other person in the room who has a southern accent, which may have been the problem. As she spoke, the computer of the student next to her interrupted and said, "Do you need help with that?"

Without missing a beat, she said, "Yes I do."

You may have had one of your "smart" devices give you an answer to a question you hadn't asked. Voice recognition software is one of the strange realities that our grandparents never could have even imagined. Or perhaps they could ...

Back in the good old days when we were "free-range" children and could learn independence because we were given freedom, my brothers and I lived in a neighborhood with a lot of kids our ages. In the summer, we were out the door every morning to find one another and adventure. We often would end up playing ball or riding our bikes all over.



Being late to supper was our only fear.

Sure enough, as the sun began to lower, one after another a screen door would open, and a mother would yell the single word, "Supper!" and off their kid would go toward home.

They didn't need to call our names because every one of us recognized our mother's voice and knew better than to pretend we hadn't heard. Our ears were tuned to her call. Every now and then, a dad would try calling us home, and no one had a clue whose supper was ready.



I wonder if one reason we have a hard time hearing the voice of God today is that we keep listening for a male voice, specifically an older, white man's voice speaking English with an accent like our own.



The Bible speaks of God with many feminine images, and the Holy Spirit is always feminine. So, it is cultural sexism that thinks the voice of God would only, and always, be male.

I know inclusive language is a challenge for churches, but, if we want young women, like my daughters, ever to return to church, we must show them that they, too, are created in the image and likeness of God. Too often, old hymns and texts send the opposite message.

When I called home last week, my father answered and didn't recognize my voice at first. Of course, he is deaf as a post and won't get hearing aids, but my point is that my mother never fails to distinguish which one of her three sons is calling.

I bet you can recognize voices, too. Who is this for example? *[Here, brief sound clips were played of, first, Elvis, then Maya Angelou, Judy Garland, and, finally, Adele.]*

You may not have recognized all of them because of generational differences. To say that another way:

***You recognized the voices that spoke to who you are and where you are in life.***

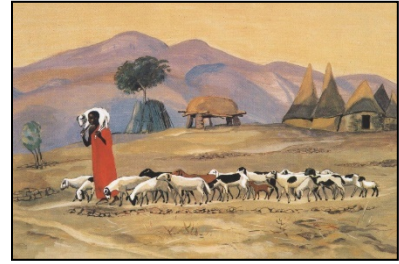
Perhaps that was exactly the point Jesus was trying to make in today's Gospel lesson. He wasn't saying that some of us belong to him and others don't. He was saying that those who follow him hear his voice because their ears are tuned to him, like my ears and my friends' ears were tuned to our mothers' calling us home. People recognize Jesus' voice because he speaks to who we are or, at least, who we are trying to become.

The original audience understood this better than we do because they had seen what he was talking about. At night, the shepherds all would herd their sheep into a common pen or a closed canyon for protection. The trouble was one sheep looked pretty much like another, so sorting them the next morning could have taken all day.



Fortunately, sheep sort themselves. They recognize the voice of the shepherd who takes care of them, and, when they hear that voice, it was the only one they would follow.

No one can recognize the voice of a stranger; still, we too often respond to strange voices because they tell us what we want to hear or are trying to sell us a set of values we prefer. Jesus calls them "hirelings" because they are doing it only for money, and shepherds truly care about their sheep.



That is a good test to apply to most things. Is this for the money, or for the greater good? Will this leave the world better for my children and grandchildren, or only benefit me right now?

As we despair over the destruction of the planet, I keep wanting to scream at corporate leaders and politicians, "Do you have no grandchildren?" The voices we should respond to are those who genuinely care for us: our children and grandchildren.

In this same chapter, Jesus gives us an easy way to distinguish the voices that call to us in this life. He said, "The thief comes to kill and steal and destroy, but I have come that you might have life." Those things that steal, kill, and destroy life and Mother Earth are **not** from God. That which gives us a quality of life we hope endures forever is.

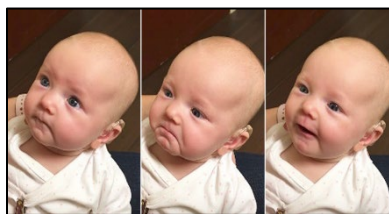
The ancient Psalmist sang about this: "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want." I don't believe that verse promises that God will give us every item on our wish list; rather, when God shepherds our lives, we *shall not want* for things that kill, steal, and destroy. We will long only for life for ourselves and others.

Jesus knew that that everyone's life, including his, passes *through the valley of the shadow of death*. He was not offering us security but was calling us to live with radical trust in God, trusting God with our lives now and forever. Abundant

life is found in following the shepherd's voice until it calls us through the valley to our eternal home.

The trouble is our ears get so full of noise that we find it hard to hear the soft voice of the Gentle Shepherd calling us to fuller, meaningful, more abundant life. Hearing the shepherd's voice is how Jesus explained his mission of radical inclusion. He told the disciples that there are other sheep who also recognize his voice and follow him.

Still, many in the church seem surprised when other people hear the call and show up. You may sometimes feel like you are one of the black sheep, but, if you will spend some time beside the still waters and let God restore your soul, you will begin to hear God whispering your name like a mother.



In Jesus' day, a deaf person never heard the voice of those who loved them. Today, however, Cochlear implants have relieved that tragedy for many. Is anything more beautiful than watching the face of a baby hearing their mother's voice for the first time? I have been blessed to witness the beauty of lives transformed by hearing the voice of their Heavenly Mother who called them by name and told them they belong to a heavenly family.

Do you ever watch the TV show "The Voice"? I've seen it only a few times, but the premise is that gifted amateur singers are chosen to be coached by famous professional singers. The selection process is interesting because the pros are the judges but sit in chairs with their backs



turned to the singer. They listen for a quality in the singer's voice they believe they can help refine. When that happens, they hit a button and their chair turns, and they see the singer for the first time.

I've never been clear what exactly the coaches are listening for. Sometimes it is obvious, other times not so much. As a singer that my home church wouldn't choose, I always feel sorry for those who are not chosen. This was their dream and, clearly, they were gifted enough to make it this far, only to be rejected on national television and before their family because their voice wasn't chosen.

Maybe you are feeling afraid today that you aren't good enough to be chosen for the eternal quality of life the Shepherd offers. The great good news is that it isn't dependent on **your** voice. It is entirely dependent on you tuning your ear to the Shepherd's voice and hearing your name being called telling you how much you are loved, how much you belong.



Follow that voice. It will lead you safely, even through the valley of shadow of death, to a life that is so abundant even death can't take it from you. See your name is inscribed on the palm of your heavenly Mother's hands. **AMEN.**