

“We hear voices!”

Easter 3 C
Acts 9:1–20

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We live in the big city. It can be a little difficult to make friends, or even to stay in touch with friends we have, in a city like this. Cities can be pretty anonymous. And the diversity of kinds of people, and *characters* can be pretty amazing, ...you think?

For if you’ve lived in Los Angeles for awhile you have seen and heard some people on the streets who *hear voices*, and if you pay attention, you realize they are *talking back to those voices*.

I’ve often thought that if the Department of Mental Health would just issue Bluetooths and cell phones to all these people on the streets who appear to be talking to themselves, it could erase all the mental illness in Los Angeles in one day! Or at least they wouldn’t seem to be any crazier than the rest of us!

But seriously, there are people out there who seem not only to “march to the beat of a different drummer,” they *respond* to voices we don’t hear. And often it is a deeply disturbed person who will say that God told him to do something. The ones who make headlines, sadly, are those who believe God told them to go out and harm or kill somebody. But, how does anyone know what the voice of God is telling the next man over?

So, just to speculate even for a moment, even with tongue-in-cheek, draws us a bit closer to understanding Saul of Tarsus, as we have it in this morning’s First Reading. Rather than “blowing off” the supernatural element of this story— that he heard a voice from heaven— maybe we should ask, What does it take for any human being—in any culture or continent or century—to discern whether we’re hearing a voice, a message from God, or a deranged idea that popped into our heads from other sources? Our world is filled with noises, sounds, voices—and more so every day. Which if any of them can be the voice of God?

Now, here’s the real rub. We may assume that the people out there who hear voices *are crazy*. They are mentally unstable. Or we may charitably assume that if they come from a religious background, they are extremely pious, deeply spiritual, and in touch with an inner spirit that frankly most of us just don’t have. We cut them slack for being religious, but we can’t relate to that much.

But most of us have our feet on the ground, and we would quickly, easily shrug off anything in the air, anything in our heads, that even came close to suggesting it was God speaking directly, individually, to us.

And I suspect that was pretty much the same for this man Saul, whom of course we know later as Paul, the Apostle. From what we can piece together out of several accounts in the New Testament, he came from a typical upbringing in the Jewish faith of his times, and became a Pharisee out of his own zealous need to do everything exactly right. If he was deeply religious, I suspect it was not so much in the heavenly-cloudy kind of way, but in the strictly obedient kind of way.

Now this may be elemental to some of us, but others do not realize who the Pharisees were. They were *not priests* or monks or mystics, but well-placed laymen. We would think of them today as merchants or businessmen of the times, who had strong social, religious and political views. Their political landscape, of course, was that their nation had long since been overrun by foreign invaders, the Roman armies. Judea was no longer under self-rule but outside rule. It was for them, over several generations, a humiliating life that they attributed to God’s judgment. Somewhat like people in this decade who tried to attribute the 9/11 terrorist attack, that took over 3,000 lives at New York

City's World Trade Center and the Pentagon, to the judgment of God. America is being judged, they argue, or this catastrophe wouldn't have happened to us.

So these Pharisees had fused their social and political and religious views. If the sad state of their nation was the result of God's judgment on them, obviously it had to be because their nation had become morally and ritually lax—that the people were not obeying the law of Moses in all its aspects, down to the tiniest detail. And the Pharisees' mission was to call to the consciences of their people by obeying this law as perfectly as possible, carrying out all 613 distinct mitzvot or commandments of the Law.

Saul of Tarsus, although probably born and raised far outside the actual boundaries of Judea in what is now Turkey, came under the influence of this kind of legalistic, exacting, no-wiggle-room Judaism.

If anything in the world, it was not what you would think of as a “woo woo” religion. Saul the Pharisee, therefore, wanted nothing to do with these wacko believers in Jesus with his Beatitudes and his hanging out with notorious sinners, prostitutes and foreigners. In fact, Saul believed that these followers of the man whom the Romans had executed as a dangerous threat to the government themselves were a corrosive, destructive influence upon good civic piety and pure religion.

And then, right in the middle of Saul's mission to round up these Christian trouble-makers, he had an experience that was so startling, so unsettling, that he had to describe it as knocking him to the ground. He would say, several times more in his writings, that he was thrown down, that there was a blinding light, and a voice came to him—a voice *challenging* him to stop in his tracks.

Probably somewhere we've all seen Christian art work that portrays Saul on the ground, with the back of his wrist against his forehead, trying to see something in the blinding light. Personally, I don't get much from the supernatural special effects. This was clearly a very personal experience for Saul that cannot be explained even with a heavenly flash of lightning; for the text tells us that his traveling companions saw the bright light, but they didn't hear any voices.

So I would suggest, if you're going to go this route—if you hear voices that you think are from God, the first thing you need to do is to pay attention. It may be a very personal message, as it was for Saul. I don't say this facetiously, because one sign I believe by which we can really know if a sign, supernatural or otherwise, is really from Almighty God, is whether it arrests us—stops us in our tracks and questions our motivations. Even if we are very obediently religious, people are constantly missing the mark with the heavy hand of religion and it may not cross their minds that the Lord *is not happy* with how they express their piety.

And ironically, this very personal voice which Saul heard and no one else heard, he came to understand was the voice of Jesus—the very personal voice of Jesus. For it says, “Saul! **Saul! Why do you persecute me?**” The voice that stops him in his tracks doesn't say, “Saul, why are you so mean to people? Why are you harassing the Christians?” but “Saul! Why do you persecute me?”

I can't help wondering about the many shrill voices we hear all the time, whether it's from televangelists condemning the sinners on their list, or even Muslim extremists — if they go about their cranky business without hearing this very personal voice from the Lord: “Why do you persecute me?” Because that's what it is, isn't it? To hunt down believers, to round them up, or to shame and blame those who follow Jesus *is to persecute Jesus* himself. For in our faith, and in our New Testament, Jesus identifies closely with his own, so much that to do a kindness to the least of his brothers and sisters, such as to offer them food and shelter and clothing, to visit them when they are sick or in prison, *is to offer food and shelter and clothing and comfort to Jesus*. And to neglect to do those things is to neglect to show those deeds to Jesus himself. Personally.

This is how our Lord approaches people. One-to-one. Face to face. Voice over, if necessary.

Get your attention. Knock you off your path, your smug certainty that you are doing what God expects or demands. **Pay attention!** Saul! **Saul!** Why? What are you doing to me? How can you think you are serving God when you are persecuting Jesus?

But of course, we are coming from the other extreme of *non-religiosity*. We are the Lutherans, after all. We sit in the back pew, whenever possible, or even better the one behind that. We are never so certain as to think we know God's will. We don't stick our necks out, never presume to have God in our back pocket, and always try to bring a covered dish or something when we're invited over for dinner. We are modest, plain people.

And we live in the 21st century, when only crazy people hear voices that others don't hear. They have a diagnosis for that, don't they? They have medications! So it is doubly hard to hear a voice—a prompting, a message, a call from beyond ourselves—that suggests we may have missed or misunderstood a true call to respond.

This morning's reading is a message that Jesus Christ, although crucified, *lives!* And if he lives in our world today, he is not without his voice. He is calling those whom he needs, to respond to his mission, and just as it has always been, he may need to arrest us, to stop us in our tracks, to knock us off-course until we are paying attention. And then to personalize his claim upon us.

The voice that Saul heard that day also said: "Get up. Go. You will be told what you must do." In other words, it is not always you picking your favorite way to serve God, and maybe it will be something *wildly more imaginative* than what even Lutherans can come up with! "Get up! Go." This is the message that each of us in our own way will hear, if we are trying to discern the voice of Jesus in our lives.

The second half of this, the story of someone named Ananias, was simply to serve God by guiding this new convert, this Saul, to continue paying attention to the voice that summoned him. For Christ's sake, Ananias' ministry to Saul was to help him understand not only this shattering experience on the road, but the power of Christ in his life. Not only to face that which had knocked him off his smug and certain course in life, but what course in life would truly serve Jesus.

This story is told dramatically and that gets our attention. But our stories may or may not be so dramatic. If we understand the power of this turning point for Saul, and its transforming power to turn him from an enemy of Jesus into his chief apostle, then just maybe we will listen ~ listen for a voice that others do not hear; listen for a message we do not quickly understand but with patience will come to; listen for guidance from another whether she or he be a stranger or a friend that can help us sort out the noises in our world from the genuine article: the call of God, the appeal of the living Lord not just to hear him or be impressed by his message, but to serve him where he puts us, and to go where he sends us. Amen?