**Can You Hear Me Now?**

**FBC Albemarle**

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“Can you hear me now?” That is the famous phrase from the Verizon commercials that ran from 2002 and ended nine years later. You couldn’t get away from it. If you watched TV for any length of time, you were bound to hear the question to promote Verizon’s vast network. The guy who was the face of Verizon for almost a decade made millions finding ways to ask the question, “Can you hear me now?” Interestingly enough, he now reps for Sprint, a rival company who is trying to gain more of the market segment from the company he once worked for.

 In Psalm 29, God is actually asking the same question: “Can you hear me now?” This psalm is a hymn of praise but it seems to be somewhat different in that it is calling on the heavenly beings to praise God rather than God’s people. NRSV says, “Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings.” NIV says, “Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones.” The Message translates as, “Bravo, God, bravo! Gods and all angels shout, “Encore!” Seemingly, this hymn takes place in the heavenly realms.

Verses 3-9 provides the reason for praise. In the ancient world, thunderstorms were often taken to be indications of divine revelation. Throughout the body of this psalm, the psalter uses thunderstorm imagery in portraying the divine power of the Almighty. “Voice of the Lord” is used seven times and it seems to suggest that God is speaking through the sounds of the approaching thunderstorm.

Every once in a while, I like to stop long enough to listen to a thunderstorm. The blowing of the wind, cracking of thunder and streaks of lightening through the clouds. It can sometimes be scary if it is right above you but when it is somewhere in the distance, it reminds me of the great power and majesty of nature.

This psalm refers to thunder, lightning, damage to trees, the earth shaking, and thus the power of a mighty thunderstorm. This imagery in the Hebrew scriptures brings to mind the power of chaos. The waters represent the powers of chaos and disorder that oppose God’s creation. The “flood” in verse 10 reminded the Hebrew people of the waters of chaos in the Great Flood of Noah’s time. The purpose of the psalm is to remind the listeners that the thundering voice of YHWH is greater than the chaos found in the world. That divine voice is so powerful that it breaks the cedars of Lebanon, a symbol of great strength. The poetic proclamation of the psalm is that the thundering voice of YHWH rules over the powers of chaos. The power is both overwhelming and majestic!

The final two verses come back to the praise of God and its implications. YHWH rules over the powers of nature as well as ruling in the human realm. The last verse invites YHWH to channel the great power imagined in this psalm toward granting peace to the people of God. The hope is that YHWH will bring the same order both to life and to creation.

When is the last time you heard the voice of God? When is the last time you felt like God was speaking to you directly? A lot of times, we don’t think we hear God’s voice in our lives. However, I think God is often asking the question, “Can you hear me now?”

Most often, we are resistant to hearing God’s voice. God is speaking but we are not listening. Frederick Buechner makes a similar observation: "We are so used to hearing what we want to hear and remaining deaf to what it would be well for us to hear that it is hard to break the habit. But if we keep our hearts and minds open as well as our ears, if we listen with patience and hope, if we remember at all deeply and honestly, then I think we come to recognize, beyond all doubt, that, however faintly we may hear him, he is indeed speaking to us, and that, however little we may understand of it, his word to each of us is both recoverable and precious beyond telling."

Most of the time, we are looking for the burning bush or the angel of the Lord to show up. We are waiting for the sea to part and the manna to fall from heaven. We are looking for the blinding light Paul saw on the road to Damascus. Yet, we probably should ask ourselves whether we would even recognize it if God spoke to us in these ways. We are so busy looking for our own answers to our questions, would we even recognize the voice of God if it smacked us in the face? I would dare say that many of us would simply point the fire extinguisher to the burning bush and put it out rather than listening for God’s voice.

The difficult part of listening for God’s voice is discerning whether it is God we are hearing or whether it is the chaotic noise of the world. We sometimes would rather attribute the voice to just something we ate and not pay much attention to what we might be hearing. The truth is, we don’t hear God with our ears. We hear God deep within our souls. It requires some spiritual discipline to discern whether its God or just heartburn.

Blaise Pascal, the remarkable scientist, mathematician, theologian and Christian of the seventeenth century once wrote that “all the unhappiness of humanity arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own room.” The reason for this inability, he writes, is “the natural poverty of our feeble and mortal condition. So miserable that nothing can comfort us when we think of it closely.” In order not to “think of it closely,” we turn to what Pascal calls “diversion” to distract ourselves from ourselves. Think about it. If it was hard for those in the seventeenth century, how much harder is it for us today? The “diversions” have multiplied over time and is now much more prevalent.

So, what is the answer? The discernment of God’s voice is best done in solitude and silence. To be in solitude is to choose to do nothing for extensive period of time. In solitude, we give up the notion that we can fix it or we can do it under our own power. Silence of course go hand-in-hand with solitude. The diversions are set aside and allow our souls to listen with God. We stop making demands and actually align our heart’s desire with God’s desire. Our soul longs for this.

You might still be asking, “How do I know it’s God’s voice and not my own?” Let me give you a few practical things to consider:

* *Is it consistent with Scripture?* One of the oldest principles of biblical interpretation is "Let Scripture interpret Scripture." If a particular verse from the Bible seems to jump out from the page, take a moment to consider whether it's consistent with what we read elsewhere. Does it pass "the love test" -- in other words, does it serve the overarching purpose of God's love?
* *Does it serve God's purposes?* Does it help spread the good news? Does it build up the church and the kingdom?
* *Does it direct me along the path of humility?* One of the most potent temptations in the spiritual life -- indeed, some have called it the single greatest temptation -- is pride. We're far more likely to be led astray by a voice that feeds our pride than by one that leads us in the direction of humble servanthood, after the example of Jesus Christ.
* *Is it confirmed by what others are discerning?* One of the powerful gifts the Lord has given us is the gift of community. Rarely does God speak a message to just one person that is not at the same time also being heard by others.

After ten failed operations, Lex Gillette lost his eyesight completely when he was eight years old. By the time he got to East Carolina University, he figured out he could run like the wind, so he went out for the track team. You may be wondering how can a blind guy run track? Well, Lex has a friend. His friend runs in front of Lex and calls his name. Lex just runs toward a voice he knows he can trust.

Lex’s best event became the long jump. In the long jump, you run as fast as you can down a three-foot-wide track from about 100 feet away. With your last step, you launch into the air as high and as far as you can from a wooden board in the track without stepping over and land into a sand pit.

What Lex does is simple and impossible at the same time. When it’s his turn to compete, his friend squares his shoulders to the sand pit down the track, then goes to the edge of the pit and starts yelling, “Fly! Fly! Fly!” over and over. Lex runs toward his friend’s voice as fast as he can and then hits the board on his sixteenth step and flies into the sand pit.

It is remarkable how far he can jump. Most often, he exceeds 21 feet while winning the silver medal in the summer Paralympics in 2004 (Athens), 2008 (Beijing), 2012 (London) and 2016 (Rio de Janeiro).

God wants us to be like Lex. He wants us to run toward a voice we know we can trust. God wants us to set aside the distractions in our lives and truly hear God’s voice for our lives. God loves us. God desires the very best for us. God wants to bless us beyond our wildest dreams. We just have to place our faith and trust in the one, true voice and just run towards it as fast as we can. We should jump into his arms of tender mercy, forgetting what is behind us and straining toward what is ahead. God knows we can’t always see what is ahead of us but we can always hear God if we will only listen. His is the voice that is yelling, “Fly! Fly! Fly!” His is the one we can trust. Can you hear him now?