

Listen! Hear!

February 26, In the Year of Our LORD, 2006

Gates Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

2 Kings 2:1-12 and Mark 9:2-9

We are bombarded with competing if not conflicting voices and sounds. To what are we listening? What do we hear?

Last week, on one of our colder days, I pulled up alongside another car at a stoplight. Even though my car windows were up and my radio was tuned to 91.5 and even though the car next to me had its windows up as well, I was still able to hear the music of the radio in that car over the music of Vivaldi. I sat there at the intersection fuming because that to which I wanted to listen was being drowned out by what was supposedly “music” from the car next to me!

We are bombarded with competing if not conflicting voices and sounds. To what are we listening? What do we hear?

Last week, I was speaking to my younger daughter, Melissa, the Air Force 2Lt. Sally and I visit her this coming weekend at Goodfellow AFB in San Angelo, Texas. Melissa is just a few months away from concluding school and getting her first assignment, in all likelihood somewhere other than in the continental United States. The last time we saw Melissa was at Christmas and I was sporting a beard and slightly longer hair. Sally likes the beard. Melissa does not – (conflicting voices). In anticipation of our visit, Melissa asked whether I still had the beard and about the length of my hair. I assured her that I had performed a couple days of military duty between Christmas and now and that the beard was gone. I also promised I would get a haircut. She wants to introduce us to many of her colleagues, fellow 2Lts, this coming Saturday at a barbecue and wants to make sure that her father, the Lieutenant Colonel, doesn't look like a “shaggy dog.”

On Sunday, June 4th, the day after my retirement from the Air Force, I will probably shave my beard for perhaps the last time. By then Melissa will probably be in Korea, and in the end, she also knows that Sally's choice for a beard will be heard over hers.

We are bombarded with competing if not conflicting voices and sounds. To what are we listening? What do we hear?

This week, members of Third Presbyterian Church are in New Orleans to work on the same project as will the team from the Presbytery next week and then the sixteen of us from Gates Presbyterian Church in May. What an interesting time for the people of Third to be there! The sounds and sights of Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, Fasching, Carnival - whatever you want to call the last days before Ash Wednesday - will stand in sharp contrast to the cries of despair from those persons whose homes are still destroyed and in many instances still untouched. Today's Democrat and Chronicle talks of how one doesn't need to walk too far from Bourbon Street before one is confronted with the signs of destruction, indeed streets still littered with furniture and parts of what were once peoples' homes!

As a teenager living in Germany, I vividly remember the sights and sounds of what in Germany is called Fasching, how the Frankfurt American High School Band would perform in beer halls – and how, to the music of Sousa, these rabble-rousing Germans would revel in the sound of our music. The contrast of the extravaganza between Fat Tuesday and the solemnity of Ash Wednesday is still so stark, is it not?

We are bombarded with competing if not conflicting voices and sounds. To what are we listening? What do we hear?

As the Torino Winter Olympics come to a conclusion this evening, what sounds will we remember from that international gathering? The cries of triumph? The cries of despair, because, God forbid, someone was only the fourth or fifth best at a particular sport of the 6.5 billion of us who now inhabit this globe? To what sounds did we hearken from Torino? The attempts, particularly of the media, to sow discord among athletes? The silliness of Bode Miller or the incredulousness of Sash Cohen who, having fallen twice in her figure skating long program, thought she deserved *less* than silver – that silver was a “gift?” Yes, the television audience numbers were down for NBC. They still stand to earn close to \$75 million dollars on the games, but what I find distressing are some of the reasons given for the low audience numbers. The first reason given is the six-hour time difference, and the third reason, that more people wanted to watch “American Idol,” doesn’t faze me. However, the second rationale for low numbers of viewing by citizens of the United States is, to quote, “the absence of a nation to loathe.” The theory is that the Cold War were the “good old days” when competition was between good and evil!

We are bombarded with competing if not conflicting voices and sounds. To what are we listening? What do we hear?

Just think of the messages the world gives us! How can we miss the bombardment of advertising that tells us that with the newest gadget, the biggest or fastest “whatever,” we will be saved from mediocre lives! As we prepare to end this season of Epiphany, this season of the Revelation of Jesus as the Savior for all people of the world, are we ready to again hear the messages of sacrifice, simplicity, service – in which we will ultimately find our salvation?

We are bombarded with competing if not conflicting voices and sounds. To what are we listening? What do we hear?

Today, on the last Sunday of our Epiphany Season, the day of the Transfiguration, we are privileged again to hear of God’s words spoken from the heavens. Like bookends, the first and last Sundays of Epiphany include words spoken by the Creator. On January 8, when we read of Jesus’ baptism, the story concluded with God’s voice:

“You are my Son, the Beloved, with You I am well pleased.”

And today, as read by Rob, we heard:

“This is me Son, the Beloved, listen to Him!”

How wonderful it is to embrace the high moments of Scripture: Elijah’s ascension into heaven on a chariot, as we heard repeated from 2 Kings, Jesus’ baptism, and here, this incredible moment when He is transfigured with Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet. Who among

us can fault Peter, James and John for wanting to freeze the moment in time, build little temples to these three ambassadors of God – and indeed perhaps not even come back off the mountain – but revel in the grandeur and wonder and bright lights!

We are bombarded with competing if not conflicting voices and sounds. To what are we listening? What do we hear?

You and I gather in this sanctuary each Sunday because we want to hear of our salvation, the redemption that is ours in Jesus the Christ. There is nothing wrong with that! That is a central piece of the Christian story, a focal point of our journey of faith with and towards God. However, just as the disciples needed to discern the message of Jesus, so we need to make sure we understand what Jesus was about – and the mission and ministry to which we are called as disciples in the present age.

The disciples were bombarded with conflicting messages!

- In their day and age, the coming of Messiah meant glory and power and here, this Jesus, was talking about service and sacrifice!
- The disciples being with a Man Who could perform such wonderful miracles and Who clearly spoke with an authority that was new even to the Scribes and Pharisees meant they were with a Superstar, and surely that meant super things would unfold when they reached Jerusalem – and yet, here, this Jesus, was talking about rejection and death!
- To be one of the twelve disciples was an invitation to be close to this Man/God. Who can blame those twelve for jockeying amongst themselves for who it was that would sit at the right hand and the left hand of Jesus “when He came into His glory,” and yet, here, this Jesus, was talking about the first being last, the greatest being the servant.

We are bombarded with competing if not conflicting voices and sounds. To what are we listening? What do we hear?

- Do we hear the voices of the voiceless?
- Do we hear the voice of the downtrodden?
- Do we hear the voice of those of New Orleans for whom Mardi Gras is a sad reminder that their lives are still broken after Hurricane Katrina?
- Do we hear the voice of those of the Middle East whose lives are still, yet still, a turmoil of confusion and despair?
- Do we hear the voice of those whose loved ones are ill, facing surgery, are in hospice – those who are hungry, thirsty, begging for the sustenance of life and the sustenance of faith?
- Do we hear the voice of those who are in such need –

... that we, the blessed, those who believe in the transfigured Christ, would be the hands and feet, voices and caring of the one church whose voice must and will be heard above the din of the world, so that we might fill the hearts and souls and minds and spirits of all of God’s people as those who are beloved of the Son, the beloved of God!

Amen.