

Finding Your Voice

People seem to be walking around in a daze these days. What happened to my political party? It seems to be unraveling. Where is Walter Cronkite? I can no longer find a voice of reason I can trust in the media. About 15 years ago, the entertainment industry promised me reality on TV; but, that reality turned out to be entertainment. So, where do I find reality now? And, what about my neighbor? Is he a terrorist, or possibly on his way to becoming one? Who do I trust? To which voice should I listen? People are shaking their heads, discouraged, never having felt so unsettled.

Jesus was always concerned that his followers would begin listening to voices other than his own. He warned them, saying that the world is filled with sweet-talking people, who were incapable of having anything but their own interests in mind. By contrast, Jesus likened himself to a Good Shepherd. He said that a Good Shepherd was always ready to lay down his life for the sake of his sheep. The Good Shepherd put the interests of others ahead of his own. He warned his disciples that they needed to train themselves to recognize and distinguish his voice from other dangerous voices in the world.



Jesus, the Good Shepherd

Jesus said to his disciples, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers....I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10: 1-5, 11)

The voice of our Lord provides safety, reality, reason, sanity and goodness in our lives. All other voices have the potential of leading us astray into dangerous and scary places, far from reality. Yet, it is only when we have a broken spirit, a contrite heart, and humble soul that we can begin to hear the loving voice of Jesus speaking to us. Humans are always tempted to run their own show, apart from trusting or listening to the voice and guidance of God. In fact, humans can easily fall in love with the sound of their own voice rather than the sound of the Lord's. The wisest of men, King Solomon, put it this way, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do

not rely on your own understanding. In all the ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil." (Proverbs 3:5,6)

Last week, I was in the local Turkish mosque, enjoying an iftar meal with my Muslim friends. During Ramadan every year, our Muslim friends invite a group from my church to break the fast on a Saturday night with them. This time of celebration and the fellowship are outstanding.

Conversations are always lively, especially because we have developed such deep friendships over the years. When the meal was over, people began to leave. I noticed my friend, Hasan, sweeping the floor and dutifully cleaning the room before going home. Hasan is always serving others. He was once a soldier for the Bosnian army when they were fighting the Serbs in the 1990s.



Traditional Iftar meal

Hasan looked at me, and said, "Dan, do you have any idea how much I enjoy meeting with you and your Christian friends in our interfaith dialogues? Do you have any idea how much these dialogues have changed my life? You have shown me a side of Christianity I never knew existed. You in particular have an energy and glow inside you I have found in no other person I have ever met. Every time I attend our dialogue meetings, I come away with new thoughts about God and life. Now, I attend our meetings expecting to hear a word from God which will enrich my life. I am hearing a voice I have never heard before."

Hasan's remarks were so unexpected, honest and humble, that I barely knew what to say back to him. We were standing close to each other in a far corner of the room - a safe distance from the other religious leaders attending the dinner. I looked him in the eye and smiled. He was telling me about Jesus without saying his name. Our hearts were connected, and there was indescribable warmth between us. It was the best iftar meal I had ever attended. Hasan has heard the voice of the Good Shepherd. And, he wants to hear more.

There is only one way to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd on a regular basis, and that is through devotion. The other competing voices in the world are strong; they will always drown out the voice of our Lord if we do not discipline ourselves to listen to him. Yet, discipline is becoming a lost art in many corridors of American life. It is certainly not a strong suit of my generation, the Baby Boomers. We do not like people telling us what to do. We don't like joining anything either, especially if it means obligation. We like to be free - free to express our own opinions.

Attending church on Sunday mornings should not be viewed as a ritual or burdensome routine. Rather, it is a wonderful way to be disciplined to hear the

voice of the Good Shepherd on a regular basis -- in the hearing of the Word of God and the worship of our Lord. Prayer should not be viewed as something the saints do, or I do when I have the time. Hopefully, it can become a natural part of our lives like breathing -- a regular time of relaxation and listening for the voice of our Lord. Reading the Bible should not be viewed as something those holy rollers from the Bible belt do; rather, it can become a daily opportunity to imbibe the living water for our parched and often confused and discouraged souls.



**People attending church
on a Sunday morning**

Our country is in desperate need of divine guidance. We have overdosed on our own selves. The internet, social media and television, to name just a few modern influences, have created a deafening cacophony of voices each competing with the other for attention. How much further are we willing to go in this loud and chaotic environment?

I have never been busier in my life in terms of my ministry. Thankfully, many churches and other religious organizations are asking for guidance when it comes to understanding Islam, and how best to respond to radical Islam in particular. They want to know the Biblical and best way to follow Jesus in these regards. They are becoming increasingly aware that our culture, media and politicians will gladly shape our views, if we do not do the harder work of seeking God's wisdom on our own.

As unsettling as things have become in our world these days, great opportunity has emerged for faithful people to remind others of the Good Shepherd - the loving and merciful God we have who is always ready to guide us, and warn us of other voices we should not be following. God has the big picture, and all the answers, too, not us; if only we would seek and trust him. The prophet Isaiah said it best when he wrote, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8,9)

Have a safe Independence Day and as you reflect on the founding principles of our great nation may you find your own voice that can lead to hearing the comforting voice of our.