How to Hear the Voice of the Lord

“See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare…” (Isa. 42).

We have celebrated moments of such great joy in this cathedral. Ten thousand people came here over Christmas and it felt electric. But this is also where we gather in times of unthinkable tragedy. On Thursday we had the funeral for Elizabeth a wonderful 43 year old mother of one of our choristers. She had succeeded at the top universities, worked in the most prestigious jobs, and then was the best single mother you will ever meet for an eight year old daughter and a ten year old son.

Elizabeth’s father asked the school chaplain to read the eulogy he wrote for his daughter. I do not think I will ever forget the agony on his face as he heard the priest reading his own words to all of us. At the end he talked about how Elizabeth had been with the children for their most formative years, that her values would always be their values... that her voice would always be deep within them.

One way of describing what it means to be human is to say that we are a collection of these voices. All sorts of voices speak to us in our inner life. Some that tear us down. Others that support us. They say things like “You’re stupid,” “That’s not good enough,” “you’ll never make it” or “She loves me no matter what,” or “this is my home.”

The voices come from many different sources – from the people we knew in the past, from kids at school, work colleagues, Sunday School teachers. They come from television, newspapers and the internet. But at a certain stage the loudest voice comes from our parents.

Many of you may not be aware of this but we are facing a public health crisis right now among our young people. The rates of anxiety, depression and suicide among teenagers and people in their early twenties has shot up. Some wonder if this is related to the rise of social media. Those internet voices are in all of us. They may be part of what is making life so crazy in our world right now.

But there is another voice in us: a deep, resonant undertone that brings us back to our true self and into harmony with all of creation. That is the voice of God. I believe that
this voice speaks to us in every moment of our life – it is just hard to hear with all the distractions of modern times.

So my question this morning is a simple one. How could you as parents, godparents, grandparents, friends and ordinary people help others, especially children, to hear the voice of the Lord? Let me suggest three things you might teach by word and example that will help us hear God.

1. First, teach yourself, and each other, to pray. People ask me what prayer is and how to do it. All prayer begins with desire, with what Barry and Ann Ulanov call an “affectionate reaching out to God.” In today’s psalm (Ps. 29), “the voice of the Lord is upon the mighty waters.” It “breaks the cedar trees... and makes the oak trees writhe.” “The voice of the Lord splits the flames of fire” (Ps. 29). I find God in the vast Pacific Ocean, among the Monterey Cypress trees at Land’s End, and in moments like this when we are together and the light streams through the stained glass windows.

The German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) said that prayer is the only way to really know God. You can read about God in the Bible or through great spiritual writers, but you actually meet God in prayer. For that matter it is also how we begin to really know ourselves. Prayer may be the moment when we come closest to saying who we really are – not who we should be or who we would wish to be, but who we really are. In prayer I am often surprised to discover what it is I really want.

In his autobiography St. Augustine (354-430) writes that we have deep drives that scatter us and even distort our lives through unhealthy addictions and compulsive behavior. Prayer helps to shape these desires for good. Prayer gives us an enlarged sense of self. It helps us to see other perspectives. And ultimately we discover that what we thought was our seeking turns out to be responding to the Other, to God, who first sought us.

So make prayer a normal thing in your house and for the people around you. Pray before bed, at meals, in moments of spontaneous disappointment or appreciation. This week for homework try praying at a time that you ordinarily would not. Listen for that voice singing beneath all creation and know yourself better as a result.

2. My second suggestion for hearing God is to cultivate humility. By this I do not mean the false humility of people who try to pretend that they are not good at something when they really are. I mean the spiritual humility required to be a humane person. This is the humility of being at home in one’s own skin. It is what we see in people who do
not need to feel like they are better than others, because they have already been accepted by God.

This week in *The New York Times*, one of my favorite contemporary theologians, David Bentley Hart, discussed his experience writing about hell. He says that the scriptural evidence is thin for the later church’s picture of an eternal, permanent place where souls are tormented. The Apostle Paul does not mention it and many New Testament passages appear to suggest that everyone will be eventually saved by God. Great Christian thinkers through the ages including Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and many others all the way to Karl Barth in the twentieth century have argued that it is impossible for anything to resist God’s love indefinitely, or for there to be a place beyond the reach of God’s compassion. Hart suggests that the idea of hell became a more powerful force for the purpose of controlling ordinary people after the Roman Empire embraced Christianity.

But this isn’t Hart’s main point. He said that of all he has written over time, this position generates the most controversy. You would think that it might be a relief to hear that no one would be subjected to everlasting torture. But this is not the case. People are attached to the idea of hell and this is why. Because we have a hard time letting go of our deep need to be vindicated, to be right, to be superior over others. We carry a little hell within us when in our competitiveness we cannot imagine being considered good unless someone else else is bad, that we cannot succeed unless they fail.

I want to share one more example because humility is both so central to the Christian life and at the same time so hard to understand today. This fall at the age of 52, James Hatch a former Navy SEAL and combat-wounded veteran, started his freshman year at Yale College.

From social media he heard that he could expect to meet “snowflakes” there. For those of you who haven’t heard this expression, a snowflake is a word that people use to describe someone “who thinks he or she is unique and special when that person is not.” His friends sometimes wondered what college with the liberal snowflakes was like and so he wrote an article to describe his experience.

Hatch described amazing personal stories of resilient young people working on Alaska fishing boats, dedicating days to solving intricate math problems, composing music for the cello. At first he hated the way they talked about safe spaces. But then he realized that what this really means is a place where difficult subjects can be discussed openly without the risk of disrespect or harsh judgment. He instantly understood that almost everyone resists bringing their ideas into environments where people would disagree
with them. And yet that this was the only way to make progress on humanity’s most challenging problems.

Bridges is our Cathedral theme this year. And Hatch writes that a good leader is a bridge builder. Someone who is confident enough to recognize that they could be wrong who actively reaches out to hear other views than one’s own. To completely realize that God accepts us and the power that comes with this is humility.

3. This brings me to the final lesson. This is what we should always be teaching to everyone around us. It is so simple. The word Gospel means good news. And the good news of Jesus is easy to understand. At his baptism God’s voice speaks from heaven and says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3). The Good News of Jesus is that each person is loved by God. God loves us so profoundly that nothing can keep God from reaching us – not even death.

This is what I have been thinking about in the days since Elizabeth’s funeral as I prepared for the moment of joy we are sharing today. There is another voice in us: a deep, resonant undertone that brings us back to our true self and into harmony with all of creation. That is the voice of God. I believe that this voice speaks to us in every moment of our life.

What will you do to help the people around you to hear the voice of God?

2 The observation about prayer as desire, Husserl, etc. come from the following. Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982) 1, 8.