
Talking to Adam

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**A sermon by the Rev. George M. Maxwell, Jr.
The First Sunday of Epiphany - Year C**

Abraham Lincoln has always been a hero of mine.

I realize that I'm not alone. This man changed the course of our country. Many of us know his words by heart.

We hear "with malice toward none, with charity for all" every time we need to put aside the bitterness of conflict.

"Four score and seven years ago" serves as a time-honored reminder that we believe in the principle that all people are created equal.

So, I was a little surprised by the sound of Lincoln's voice in the new movie bearing his name.

It's smaller than I expected, thinner, kind of a reedy, Middle-American twang.

I'm not sure what I thought Lincoln should sound like. Something closer to Pavarotti, maybe.

Daniel Day-Lewis plays Lincoln in the film. When he was asked about the voice, he said a very revealing thing.

He said that he believes that a voice is not just a noise. It's not just a composite grouping of tones and sounds. It is a deep and personal reflection of character.

So, when he prepares to take on a role, he doesn't think about the voice until after he has done a great deal of research about the character.

Then, without any real intention, he begins to hear a voice in his mind's ear. He knows there is no guarantee that he has gotten it right.

He assumes, though, that he has heard the voice for a good reason. He takes it in good faith and believes in it. And, he then dedicates himself to discovering that voice in his own body.

In other words, in preparing to play the role of Lincoln, Day-Lewis listened for the voice, recognized it when he heard it, and then believed in it, dedicating himself to discovering that voice in his own body.

It sounds a lot like the Christian life of faith.

You hear the same kind of story in the experience of Jesus at his baptism.

John had gone out into the wilderness. He was offering baptisms of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Turn away from death and toward a new life, he warned. The Day of Judgment is coming.

People came to him and were baptized with water. Jesus was one of them.

After they had all been baptized, Jesus began to pray. The heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.

And then, there was a voice. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus recognized the voice.

Jewish tradition is full of stories about the Divine Voice. The voice is described as the "daughter of sound." It is the "still, small voice" that Elijah heard as the presence of God passed by him.

Jesus had been in prayer, listening for the voice.

Jesus had been preparing himself, reflecting on the character of God. So, when he heard the voice of God, he recognized it. It was his call to be God's messenger to Israel.

And, he believed in it, dedicating himself to discovering that voice in his own body.

This pattern of listening, recognizing, and discovering is, I think, a helpful way to think about the promises that we are making today.

As parents and godparents, we are promising to bring these children up in the Christian life of faith, to help them grow into the full stature of Christ.

As those witnessing their vows, we are promising to support them in their life in Christ.

We are, in other words, promising to teach them, by our word and example, to hear the voice of God by listening to their lives.

Frederick Buechner makes this point in one of his daily meditations. "Listen to what happens to you," he says, "because it is through what happens to you that God speaks. It's in language that's not always easy to decipher, but it's there, powerfully, memorably, unforgettably."

Listen, for example, to this letter that a Mother wrote to her son as he prepared to enter the third grade.

Hey Baby,

Tomorrow is a big day. Third Grade - wow.

Chase - When I was in third grade, there was a little boy in my class named Adam.

Adam looked a little different and he wore funny clothes and sometimes he even smelled a little bit. Adam didn't smile. He hung his head low and he never looked at anyone at all. Adam never did his homework. I don't think his parents reminded him like yours do. The other kids teased Adam a lot. Whenever they did, his head hung lower and lower and lower. I never teased him, but I never told the other kids to stop, either.

And I never talked to Adam, not once. I never invited him to sit next to me at lunch, or to play with me at recess. Instead, he sat and played by himself. He must have been very lonely.

I still think about Adam every day. I wonder if Adam remembers me? Probably not. I bet if I'd asked him to play, just once, he'd still remember me.

I think that God puts people in our lives as gifts to us. The children in your class this year, they are some of God's gifts to you.

So please treat each one like a gift from God. Every single one.

Baby, if you see a child being left out, or hurt, or teased, a part of your heart will hurt a little. Your daddy and I want you to trust that heartache. Your whole life, we want you to notice and trust your heartache. That heartache is called compassion, and it is God's signal to you to do something. It is God saying, Chase! Wake up! One of my babies is hurting! Do something to help! Whenever you feel compassion - be thrilled! It means God is speaking to you, and that is magic. It means He trusts you and needs you.

Sometimes the magic of compassion will make you step into the middle of a bad situation right away.

Compassion might lead you to tell a teaser to stop it and then ask the teased kid to play. You might invite a left-out kid to sit next to you at lunch. You might choose a kid for your team first who usually gets chosen last. These things will be hard to do, but you can do hard things.

Sometimes you will feel compassion but you won't step in right away. That's okay, too. You might choose instead to tell your teacher and then tell us, We will make a plan to help together.

When God speaks to you by making your heart hurt for another, by giving you compassion, just do something. Please do not ignore God whispering to you. I so wish I had not ignored God when He spoke to me about Adam. I remember Him trying, I remember feeling compassion, but I chose fear over compassion. I wish I hadn't. ,

Chase - We do not care if you are the smartest or fastest or coolest or funniest. There will be lots of contests at school, and we don't care if you win a single one of them. We don't care if you get straight As. We don't care if the girls think you're cute or whether you're picked first or last for kickball at recess. , We just don't care.

We don't send you to school to become the best at anything at all. ,

We send you to school to practice being brave and kind.

Kind people are brave people. Because brave is not a feeling that you should wait for. It is a decision. It is a decision that compassion is more important than fear, than fitting in, than following the crowd.

Trust me, baby, it is. It is more important.

Don't try to be the best this year, honey.

Just be grateful and kind and brave. That's all you ever need to be.

Take care of those classmates of yours, and your teacher, too. You Belong to Each Other. You are one lucky boy, with all of these new gifts to unwrap this year. ,

Enjoy and cherish your gifts. , Love, Mama

Listening, recognizing, and discovering.

The gift of baptism is the gift of voice.

Our job is to teach these children to hear the voice of God by listening to their lives.

Our job is to teach them that this voice is believable, by showing them what it looks like to dedicate yourself to discovering this voice in our own bodies.

We'll know if we have been successful. We'll look up one day and realize that these children have in fact chosen compassion over fear.

We see them talking to Adam - and we'll notice that they are both laughing!

Amen

You may be interested to know -

"¢ Canon Marsh told me about the interview with Daniel Day-Lewis. Here is the link:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3IPpy58Pf-Q>

"¢ The quote from Frederick Buechner appears in his book "Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner." I came across it in a sermon by Marcus Borg, titled "Voices of Faith." Here is the link to Borg's sermon: <http://www.explorefaith.org/homiliesLent/LentenHomily03.17.03.html>

"¢ The letter to Chase was written by his mother, Glennon. She posted it on her blog. Here's the link:
<http://momastery.com/blog/2011/08/28/dear-chase-2/>

"¢ The links were all good as of the date of the sermon.