



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# **The Voice of the Lord**

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*The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty (Psalm 29:4).*

January 6 is Epiphany in the life of the church. The early church celebrated Epiphany long before they celebrated Christmas, because what mattered most was not so much when or how Christ was born, but the fact that he came to show the world the light and love and glory and grace of God – symbolized by the wise men coming from the east to see the baby Jesus.

The name “Epiphany” comes from words that mean to shine upon. It echoes the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

We sometimes say we’ve had an epiphany, and what we mean is that something suddenly became clear to us. Some truth, some insight, that had been hidden from our understanding just came into focus. We saw the light.

Seeing and hearing are two great metaphors for how we come to know God, and God’s will for our lives. Most of us muddle around in the dark for a while. We bounce back and forth between conflicting voices in the world around us, and within our own souls. But after a while – if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, as Jesus says – the Word of the Lord comes to us, and we start to see things differently. As C. S. Lewis said, “I believe in God as I believe in the sun, because I see it, and because I see everything else by it.”

The challenge, of course, is to distinguish the voice of the Lord from all the other voices in our heads. And there are

a lot of voices, aren't there? A perennial temptation is either to let those other voices drown out the voice of God, or to tell ourselves that some other voice really *is* the voice of the Lord.

We want all kinds of things in this world, so among the first voices we hear in our hearts are the voices of desire.

We want people to like us, so we listen anxiously for approval, and try hard to do whatever will keep those voices coming. We go along with what our friends say, or other people whose acceptance we crave, and keep our reservations to ourselves if we're not so sure we agree. Some of us put out on social media whatever we think will win even more approval, more "Likes" on Facebook or retweets on Twitter.

We want what money can buy: material things and financial security and the symbols we hope will prove to the world, and ultimately to ourselves, that we are successful after all – that we are, by this measure at least, "worth" something. So we listen to voices that tell us we should have all that we want for ourselves.

We want all sorts of physical pleasures, and that's all right. Pleasure, like every other good thing in life, is God's idea, and a gift from God. But some people listen to any voice that justifies getting those pleasures in any way they can, even if it means taking advantage of somebody else.

We want lots of things in life, and we're tempted to listen to any voice that justifies whatever it is that we want. Then there are the opposite voices: the ones that start out as

whispers of conscience but grow louder and more shrill, until at last they become loud shouts of condemnation.

Some people are quick to condemn others, for obvious reasons. Putting other people down can build us up by comparison, as in Jesus' parable about the Pharisee who prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." Sometimes we project onto others the very faults we suspect, but are too afraid to acknowledge, in ourselves. In any case, our brains seem to get little shots of endorphins, little squirts of satisfaction, from pronouncing judgment on other people.

For some of us, though, the voices of judgment shout inward. We save the harshest condemnation for ourselves. Some of us listen to those words, and they weigh us down with burdens of guilt and inadequacy and depression. Maybe we've internalized other people's judgments of us; or maybe our conscience is just so sensitive that it's easily triggered by the smallest shortcomings. Either way, the voices of judgment turned inward rob us of joy.

We hear all kinds of voices, voices of desire and voices of judgment, and they clamor constantly for our attention, like things that go bump in the night. Then a kind of spiritual darkness comes over us, until either we resign ourselves to living in the shadows or the eyes of our hearts long for more light and our souls strain to hear some sweeter sound of hope.

That's when we really can have an epiphany.

What does the voice of the Lord sound like when Epiphany comes, when the light of the Lord shines upon us? It sounds like hope to drive out the voices of despair. It sounds like grace to silence the sounds of condemnation. It sounds like love to redirect our desires and point them in the way that leads to lasting joy and peace.

Learning to recognize the voice of the Lord is like learning to know any other voice. We have to hear it often enough to know how to distinguish it from other voices.

At first, the untamed desires and judgments of our hearts act like a ventriloquist: they project onto God a voice that tells us only what we already believe. People have been so good at this kind of self-deception throughout history that we should make it a rule: If what we call the voice of God only ever tells us what our other voices already say, then it's probably not the voice of the Lord.

The voice of the Lord is powerful, the psalmist says, and it's full of majesty. The true voice of God comes with judgment when we are lax and complacent, content to acquiesce in falsehood and injustice. It says with John the Baptist, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" It says with the prophets, "Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!"

On the other hand, the voice of the Lord comes with courage and strength and hope when we need those things. "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you," says the Lord. Sometimes the voice of God roars like a lion; other times it comes as a still, small voice – barely audible, but

unmistakable, speaking just the word we need for guidance, comfort, and strength.

And always, in every situation, the voice of the Lord is the voice of redemption. It brings good out of evil, healing out of suffering. The voice of the Lord reminds us that Emmanuel has come, God is with us in Jesus Christ; and he will provide a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, and a love that will not let us go.





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