

“You Are Loved”
Matthew 3:13-17

One of the hardest lessons of faith is to live life motivated by love instead of fear. There are so many voices around and within us that instill fear in us. In the Disney animated movie, “Encanto,” we see the destructive results of listening to the voice of fear. The story is that of a family that escaped war through the magic of the light of a candle. Even though the father is killed, the mother escapes and builds a life of safety and prosperity with her children. But this mother becomes the matriarch of the family and keeps tight control on things because of the trauma and fear she was carrying. Thus, certain gifts were welcomed and others were shunned. The house, which was a safe haven before, was in danger of falling apart because of fear. This was all changed when she finally listened to the prophetic voice of her granddaughter. Let’s watch the confrontation between the grandmother and the granddaughter: <https://youtu.be/MVlahzuWsDw>.

What a great symbolic story for us for today. The voices of fear and control are so amplified in our world today. They are also often so loud within us. But today, the invitation is to reclaim the voice of love. That is the essential work of faith. It is about allowing God to lead us each day on the path of love despite the voices of fear that haunt us. The example of Jesus’ life gives us a vision of what is possible for each of us. The first words spoken about the birth of Jesus were words of blessing. Then the first words that were spoken to him about his ministry were words of deep love. Let’s listen to the story of his baptism from Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Jesus was beginning his public ministry with this ritual of renewal through his cousin. Jesus wanted to be immersed in the voice of love just before he started a ministry that would question and transform the whole premise of fear and evil in the world. He was going to face the voice of the tempter in the wilderness which would tell him that his life would only be good and worth something if he had power, glamour, control, and security. He needed to be grounded in the voice of God’s love. He also chose to go under the banner of a dove which is a symbol of peace and nonviolence in the world.

It is not always easy to listen to the voice of God’s love when the voices of fear seem to hook us a lot more easily. Think of it from your personal experience. When someone says something negative or fearful to you, that is often the thing that stays with you the most. But it does not have to be. The spiritual practices of prayer and gratitude are there for us each and every day to pay attention to the voice of love that is within and around us.

Desmond Tutu writes, “God is available to all of us. God says, ‘Be still and know that I am God.’ Each one of us wants and needs to give ourselves space for quiet. We can hear God’s voice most clearly when we are quiet, uncluttered, undistracted—when we are still. Be still, be quiet, and then you begin to see with the eyes of the heart.

One image that I have of the spiritual life is of sitting in front of a fire on a cold day. We don’t have to do anything. We just have to sit in front of the fire and then gradually the qualities of the fire are transferred to us. We begin to feel the warmth. We become the attributes of the fire. It’s like that with us and God. As we take time to be still and to be in God’s presence, the qualities of God are transferred to us.”

The Quaker teacher Thomas Kelly writes about finding that Voice within us. He says “Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return. Eternity is in our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto itself. Yielding to those persuasions, gladly committing ourselves in body and soul, utterly and completely, to the Light Within, is the beginning of true life.”

Whenever you find yourself scurrying, anxious, judgmental, fearful, controlling, or violent, take time to let God remind you that you are beloved, and that God is well pleased with you just as you are. Re-enter the waters of your baptism and of your birth to reclaim that goodness and to let the voice of love give you what you need to live more wholeheartedly and fully.

As a community today, we celebrate and seek the power of coming together to listen to and to amplify the voice of God, which is the voice of love in our lives. With the annual celebration of the life of the church, I celebrate with you how you have listened to the voice of God’s love in your life and in the way we lived as a community of faith that is dedicated to and focused on love.

We will take time to listen together to the affirming voice of God.

Begin by gently, simply centering and quieting your soul in whatever way works best for you. Close your eyes and fall into the silence where the living God speaks.

Offer your honest self to God at this time. Let go of all labels you hold about yourself. Let go of all the things you wish you could be. Let go of your efforts to earn acceptance from others. Sitting now in the presence of God, just be yourself.

Open your heart and hear the voice of God saying to you, “This is my beloved child with whom I am well pleased.” Let that voice and presence of love hold you.

Know that you are accepted by God just as you are. Know that, with you, God is well pleased. You do not have to do anything to earn God’s love.

Now listen again to the voice of God speaking to you these words of love through Desmond and Mpho Tutu:

Child, do you not know my voice?
It bubbles up in happy laughter:
Listen to your children play.
It echoes in the song of nature:
Stop and listen.
I speak as fresh rain on parched ground,
I speak as the summer breeze that caresses the long grass,
I speak as the gurgle of the river over the rocks,
I speak in the warm smiles of welcome,
I speak in the tender touch of comfort,
I speak in tears of joy,
I speak as unquenchable hope.
I speak in the voices of those who challenge you;
Mine are the words of the loving rebuke.
I speak in the voices of those who take pride in you;
Mine are the words of honest praise.
My voice is the happy hum in your heart
When you know you have done what is right.
My voice is the churning of your spirit
When temptation seems ready to overwhelm you.
My voice whispers "courage"
When the path you must choose seems too long or too hard.
It is I who say, "Be still a while,"
When the frenzy wants to overtake you.
Have you not heard me yet?
I am very near.
I breathe in your breath,
I pray in your prayer,
Have you not heard me yet?
Stop and see.
Look, listen.
Yes,
That is me. Amen.