

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Talking to Ourselves: Our Voices and God's Voice in Our Self-Exhortation

First Scripture Lesson: I Kings 19 (selected verses)

Second Scripture Lesson: Psalm 42 (selected verses)

Focus: Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my help and my God.—Psalm 42:11

Words lead the soul.—Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*

God . . . a being having all those perfections that I cannot comprehend, but can somehow touch with my thought.—Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

First Scripture Lesson: I Kings 19

Show of hands now. How many of you, when you were growing up, talked to yourself?

OK. Good. Almost everyone.

Now how many of you still talk to yourself?

OK, still a lot, although not quite as many. Those of you who put your hands down for the second question?—I don't believe you. Really, it's nothing to be embarrassed about—we all do it. In fact, I'm going to argue that talking to ourselves is one of the leading indicators that we are being the rational creatures God intends us to be.

"Thinking is a conversation with oneself." That's a definition of thinking that goes back 2,500 years, but it's still a good one, I think.

Don't get me wrong: neuroscience is really cool—the advances in the field have been remarkable and admirable. And I love those images of the human brain that show it all lit up in different colors depending on which part is more or less active. But when it comes to what thinking is like for us—well, "thinking is a conversation with oneself."

But what's even more remarkable is that others are a party to this conversation.

We all know this: we all carry around the voices—the words—of other people: parents, teachers, coaches, counselors, friends, classmates in our heads. Those of us who heard mostly positive and loving words are blessed indeed, probably far more than we realize. But we all know what it's like to carry those negative, hateful words: "you are so dumb, you're such a baby, you'll never amount to anything, you're this, you're that, you?—are you kidding? You can't do this."

Those words get inside us—and can hurt us for the rest of our lives.

But here's an even more remarkable truth: God too is a party to our thought, to our internal conversation. And one of the greatest ongoing acts of human liberation—an act of human liberation that the Holy Spirit is carrying out all the time, even as we speak, is God silencing those negative voices—those lies—inside us, silencing them with the truth: “You are my beloved child. I am with you. And you can do this.”

That's what happened to the prophet Elijah way up on Mount Horeb, the mountain of God—in the sound of the thinnest stillness.

But why is Elijah way up on Mount Horeb, all by himself, in the first place? Because he's running for his life from Queen Jezebel, whose words have very much gotten inside his head.

Jezebel herself is an idolater, a worshipper of Baal, and she's taken most of the people down that path with her. Elijah, the prophet of the one true living God, has been condemning this Baal worship and all who practice it.

And so Jezebel sends Elijah a message: you're nothing, Elijah, and you have nothing; and by this time tomorrow, I swear, Elijah, you're a dead man.

So Elijah runs for his life, but as he does he carries Jezebel's words with him. I Kings chapter 19 verse 4:

But Elijah himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life.”

In other words, “I'm all alone, I'm nothing; I'm as good as dead already.”—that's what he's saying to himself, which is just what Jezebel said to him.

But God doesn't take away Elijah's life; so Elijah does what anyone would do in his situation—he falls asleep. Verses 5-7:

Then Elijah lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and he . . . lay down again.

The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

And the food does sustain Elijah, for forty days and forty nights as he journeys to Mount Horeb, and when he gets there he takes refuge in a cave. And there, God speaks to Elijah, not externally but in the internal conversation of his thought. I Kings 19: 9-18:

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire;

And, then, after the fire, the sound of the thinnest stillness.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Then the LORD said to him, "Go, and return on your way because there are still some who have not bent the knee to Baal."

Second Scripture Lesson: Psalm 42 & Sermon

Talking to oneself—most of us do it (we all do it), but it is, I think, one of those “mysteries in plain sight”—that is, a common, everyday occurrence that when you stop to think about it (which we usually don’t)—is really quite mysterious.

Think about it: I’m exhorting myself—urging myself on—to do something I don’t want to do: “C’mon you can do this,” I say to myself. But who exactly is urging whom here? Because “I and “myself” are the same person, right? And why do I need to exhort myself, if I and myself are the same person, I mean I’m not two people, right? And yet we do it all the time— It’s a mystery . . . we are a mystery . . . to ourselves.

As you might expect, self-exhortation is all over the Bible—it is after all the most human of all books—and it’s especially prevalent in that most human of all the books of the Bible, the Book of Psalms, with Psalm 42 presenting a fine and famous example.

It’s clear in Psalm 42 that some negative and hateful words have gotten inside the Psalmist’s head. In verse 10, the Psalmist says:

As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

And the Psalmist sounds every bit as forlorn as Elijah sitting in his cave. Verse 3:

My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

The Palms are prayers. And as prayers, they’re also a conversation: not just the Psalmist speaking to God, but also God speaking to the Psalmist. And so in the sound of the thinnest stillness, and in the words of his own self-exhortation, God is party to the Psalmists ’thinking, to the Psalmist talking to himself. Verses 5 and 11:

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

In a moment, we're going to sing Psalm 42; because, in addition to being prayers, the Psalms are also songs. And as we sing, let's make those words—and especially those words of self-exhortation—our own.

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

Sermon

I want to give you two of my favorite examples of self-exhortation, going back a few millennia to do it—but then, I want to bring us to today.

The first is from Homer's *Odyssey*.

It's the scene where Odysseus, after 20 years away—10 fighting the Trojan War, and 10 more wandering, facing all sorts of monsters and menaces—Odysseus at last arrives home, alone and disguised as a beggar, only to find his castle overrun by his rivals, men who have not only been living high off his land for years, but who are also vying to marry his wife and take over his kingdom.

He's furious. He wants to lash out, but, for the time being at least, he can't. And so he exhorts himself:

Odysseus lay sleepless, his heart growling within him at the suitors' evil deeds; but he smote his breast, and rebuked his heart, saying: "Endure, my heart, endure, you have endured worse than this."

The second is from the early days of the Protestant Reformation.

In 1521, Martin Luther is excommunicated on charges of heresy. If he refuses to recant and is thereafter found guilty—which he most certainly will be if he refuses to recant—he faces execution.

So he stands up to make a speech in his own defense, a speech that will end with the now famous words: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God save me. Amen."

But before he begins to speak, he takes a moment. He does what has done, and will continue to do, at difficult times throughout his life: he pauses, and touching his right index finger to his forehead, he says to himself:

"I am baptized."

"I am baptized," which for Luther meant that nothing in life or in death—not rulers, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation—nothing in life nor in death would be able to separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

"Endure my heart, endure [heart], [And] I am baptized [forehead]."

When it comes to talking to ourselves, especially when it comes to self-exhortation, we could do a lot worse.

And these days we need such talking to ourselves, because these feel like difficult times. Maybe all times feel like difficult times to those living in them, and certainly we all face difficulties at one time or another, but still, these feel like difficult times.

And in difficult times, those negative, hurtful words, words that have gotten inside of us—“It is enough; now, O LORD, I’m all alone, I’m nothing.” “As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, “Where is your God?”—these words and words like them, negative hateful words, words that in one way or another, in one form or another, have gotten inside us—in difficult times, such words come to the fore; they grieve our souls.

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?*

The soul (to cite another definition that goes back 2500 years) the soul is that point of connection—the interface, if you will—between us and God.

And because the soul is the interface between us and God, our thoughts always somehow touch God, or better God touches our souls—in thought. In other words, the soul is the place where we talk to ourselves, and God talks to us.

“Thinking is a conversation with oneself.” But what’s even more remarkable is that others—including God—are a party to that conversation. God is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

Which brings me to today—to Juneteenth.

Because yes, Juneteenth commemorates that day in 1865 when the Emancipation Proclamation—“All persons held as slaves within any State, shall be forever free”—finally reaches Texas through the port city of Galveston:

The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free.

This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor.

Of course, that “absolute equality” did not come about simply by declaring it, as our subsequent national history sadly and tragically showed. But still this can be said: Juneteenth also celebrates one of the greatest **ongoing** acts of human liberation—an act of human liberation that the Holy Spirit is carrying out all the time, even as we speak: God silencing those negative, hateful voices within us—those lies (you’re not equal, you’re inferior; you are not really a person; you are only a piece of property to be bought and sold)—silencing those lies with the truth: “You are my beloved children. I am with you. And you can do this—you were meant to be free; you can be free; and you will be free.”

Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we are free at last. You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free. When it comes to talking to ourselves, especially when it comes to self-exhortation, we could do a lot worse.

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?*

The soul . . . the soul (to quote another great poet of our time) . . . The soul is a stubborn thing. Doesn't dissipate so quickly. Souls remain. They remain here in the air, in empty space, in dusty roots, in sidewalks that I knew every single inch of as a child like I knew my own body . . . and in the songs that we sing, and that is why we sing.

And the Psalms are songs. And that is why we sing—in the sound of the thinnest stillness:

*Why are you cast down,
O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.*

Show of hands now. How many of you talk to yourselves?

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.