



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Voicemails from Heaven”

Revelation 21:1-6a

November 4, 2018

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I like to think of myself as a very concise person. I'm not one to use a lot of extra words. Unless I'm leaving a voicemail message, in which case I mysteriously become long-winded, wordy, winding, directionless.

Hi, it's Amy....uh... yeah...I'm just calling to say hi and see how you are doing and... uh... give me a call when you get a chance. I hope you are well and things are good and yeah... Actually, no reason to call back. Unless you want to. Um, I was just, you know, checking in on you... so anyways, uh, yeah, that's all for now. Bye!

The truth is that I'm much better at email and texting. Such means of communication are efficient and concise and when I text or email, I never ramble.

But here's the thing.

There is nothing like the sound of a person's voice.

I remember my first car accident. It wasn't a bad accident but I was upset, agitated, traumatized. When I could get to a phone, I called my dad. As soon as I heard the sound of his calm, measured voice, I knew everything was going to be OK. His voice was music to my ear.

There's nothing like the sound of a person's voice.

Hearing an actual voice connects us with others in a way that emails and texts do not. This isn't my opinion. This is a scientific fact.

A new study shows the voices of loved ones can help awaken the unconscious brain and speed recovery from a coma. Coma patients who heard familiar stories repeated by family members four times a day for six weeks, via recordings played over headphones, recovered consciousness significantly faster and had an improved recovery compared to patients who did not.¹ A familiar voice can awaken us.

There's nothing like the sound of a person's voice.

Imagine you need people to donate to a cause near and dear to you. How do you get as many people as possible to donate? You could send an email to two hundred of your friends, family members, and acquaintances. Or you could ask a few people face-to-face. Which method would mobilize more people for your cause? A 2017 study reported on in the Harvard Business Review found that a face-to-face request is thirty-four times more successful than an email. Thirty-four times more successful.²

¹<https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2015/01/family-voices-and-stories-speed-coma-recovery>

²<https://hbr.org/2017/04/a-face-to-face-request-is-34-times-more-successful-than-an-email>

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Another study reports that people are more open to opinions they disagree with when the opinions are spoken as opposed to written. The findings explore how specific aspects of speech, such as intonation and frequent pauses, serve as cues that humanize the people who are speaking, making them seem more intelligent and emotionally warm than those whose opinions are written. In other words, actually talking with people works better than exchanging opinions on Facebook.³

There's nothing like the sound of a person's voice.

Children can recognize their mother's voice in less than a second. Other voices are easily and quickly recognizable. That's Frank Sinatra. That's Adele. That's Walter Cronkite. That's Oprah Winfrey. That's Fred Rogers. That's Daniel Tiger. That's James Earl Jones. That's Julia Child.

There's something about the sound of a person's voice.

Especially when that voice belongs to someone who has died. Especially when that voice belongs to someone we love who has died. Here is writer Charles Ornstein writing about a voicemail that he received from his mother.

The voice mail message was like so many others from my mom over the years. "Hi, it's mom. There's a storm coming your way ... Please drive very carefully ... Love you. Bye."

Ornstein continues.

It's the type of message I normally didn't pay much attention to — if I listened to it at all. But three weeks after she uttered those words my mom died at a hospital outside Detroit. I unearthed this message and others from her while plumbing my iPhone's cache of deleted messages, amazed and grateful by this unexpected ability to preserve that voice.⁴

Another writer calls these found messages from her deceased mother voicemails from heaven. She writes

I listened to these voicemails over and over again in the quiet, darkness of my bedroom. Her voice was so real. Her spirit so alive. It was as if the voicemails were coming straight from Heaven.⁵

Note that we aren't talking about texts from heaven. Or emails from heaven. No, voicemails from heaven.

There's nothing like the sound of a person's voice.

Today is All Saints' Sunday. Today we remember those who have died. This All Saints' Sunday we remember the voices of those who have died. Their resonance. Their intonation. Their cadence. There is perhaps nothing more valued, more precious, more cherished than the voices of those we love. This is the day we remember and give thanks for those voices. The way they have shaped us and challenged us, comforted us and confounded us and today we miss their voices.

³ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/11/171106112228.htm>

⁴ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/parents-voicemails-death_n_7440088

⁵ <https://www.wral.com/sloane-heffernan-voicemails-from-heaven/16447786/>

In this room, at this hour, I most clearly hear the voices of those who have died when we sing certain songs together. Take the hymn, *Be Still, My Soul*. I can't hear it without hearing the voice of Shirley Barker, a Broadstreeter who died in 2016. In the weeks before her death, I would visit her in the hospital. And, at each visit, we would sing *Be Still, My Soul*. I didn't know the words to all the verses so I would pull them up on my phone. Shirley knew all the words by heart. As we sang, I would lean in to hear her rich, low, unique, faith-filled voice. I wonder if God's voice sounds a little bit like Shirley Barker singing *Be Still, My Soul*.

On this All Saints' Sunday, we give thanks for the voices of those who have helped us hear the voice of God.

This day isn't just about looking back. It's also about the present and about the future. How are we using our voices to support people we love, to reinforce and expand the community of welcome? Are we using our voices to participate in God's work of creating justice and proclaiming grace and striving for wholeness?

It's not enough to remember the voices of those we love. It's not enough to use our voices in service of repairing God's world. We are also called to help others find their voice. Help the next generation find their voice. Help others hear God's voice in their lives.

In the spring of 2003, then 13-year-old Natalie Gilbert sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a nationally televised basketball game, specifically an NBA Western Conference playoff game. She was the winner of a national contest. It was a dream come true for this eighth grader.

When her big moment arrived, Natalie bravely stood alone at mid-court in Portland's Rose Garden Arena. She started strong and then it became clear that she had forgotten the words. Closing her eyes and shaking her head, she appeared on the verge of tears.

A few incredibly painful seconds go by. No one goes to her aid. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a tall man in a suit walks toward her. It's Hall of Fame point guard, then head coach of the Portland Trailblazers, Maurice Cheeks. He puts his arm around Natalie and begins feeding her the lines of the anthem and then singing with her.

Here's the thing. Cheeks can't sing. Really. He can't hold a tune. And it doesn't matter. As he stands beside her and sings with her, Natalie's voice gets stronger and more confident. Cheeks encourages the crowd to sing along. They do. Together, they make it all the way through, to "the home of the brave."

Later, Cheeks, said of that moment with Natalie: "I never thought about doing it before I did it. I just saw a little girl in trouble and I went to help her. I'm a father. I have two kids myself. I'd have wanted someone to help them if they could."⁶

How reassuring, how deeply comforting to think that when we are uncertain, when we are lacking in confidence, when we struggle to find the melody, when we forget the words, we have people, a community offering support and understanding who will help us find our notes, help us find our voice.

On this All Saints' Sunday, we recommit ourselves to helping others find their voice, to helping others hear the voice of God. Because others have done that for us.

⁶ <http://www.sportingnews.com/us/nba/news/maurice-mo-cheeks-national-anthem-natalie-gilbert-video-coach-nba-hall-of-fame-trailblazers/h749s8eomo4l1gy86ju2g9r26>

On this All Saints' Sunday, our most important work is to remember those who have been saints to you. Right now, I invite you to remember one or two of your saints, one or two of your people who have died. In a few minutes, you will be invited to say their names aloud. You may be sharing the name of a parent or sibling or child or teacher or spouse or colleague or friend—someone who, in life and in death, shows you what it means to follow God. Who helps you bear the unbearable. Who offers you courage and strength and hope. In this moment, remember them.

Remember the sound of their voice.

Remember their voice.

Amen.