Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

St. Mary’s Riverside, 2021

Anyone who thinks that the Roman Catholic Church

does not have a sense of humor

Should take a few moments

to consider the Catholic church’s official liturgical calendar.

Our calendar does a variety of bizarre things

Like thinking that the new year begins in December with Advent

When the rest of our society understands

That it happens on January 1st.

Equally out of sync with societal reality

We announce that the Christmas season isn’t over

until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord,

which occurred last week

But some years not until the 20th of January.

Tell that to my Walgreens that started

after Christmas sales on December 23rd.

And maybe most jaw-dropping of all

This Sunday announces that we have

not only left the Christmas season

But returned to Ordinary time.

Now I don’t know about you

But I find it impossible to consider this ordinary time

By any stretch of the imagination.

On the other hand this seems to be a perennial problem

In syncing liturgical time with societal time

Some years on this transitional week into ordinary time

planes were landing on the Hudson

remember Captain Sully?

Or the governor of Illinois was being impeached

Or a black man was about to be sworn in as President

I and I thought those years were unusual …

But they don’t hold a candle

To the conjunction of recent events.

So instead of “ordinary time”

Are we floundering in Covid time?

On the brink of insurrection time?

Lost in impeachment time?

Or just stuck in “Hunker-down-until-vaccination time?”

The first reading today is about a boy prophet

metaphorically trying to figure out what time it is …

Like a biblical parody on the famous “who’s on first” routine

Or some zany script from a Marx brothers’ film

Samuel gets caught in the middle of an apparent holy joke

Trying to apprehend if it is bed time or Eli time,

voices-in-my-head time or the spirit-is-messing-with-me time.

Samuel only finds his way out of this dilemma

When the wise Eli helps him discern the truth in the voices

And so discover that it is actually God-is-calling-time.

Our nation could use a few dozen Elis these challenging days

When a chorus of disparate voices

Are twisting this country in so many different directions.

We could use a few Elis telling us

In the midst of this rebellious cacophony

to lie down, take a time out

and listen with our hearts and not just our ears.

Ironically the human brain is not wired for empathetic listening[[1]](#endnote-1)

The kind of listening in which

We set aside our prejudices and fully attend to the speaker.

Empathetic listening is an exercise in suspended judgment

Exerting more energy on generous hearing

Rather than our usual ploy of quietly crafting rebuttals

poised to launch when the speaker is finished.

Rather than suspending judgment

and engaging openly with the moment,

In order to conserve neural energy,

Our brains constantly generate predictions

That allow us to interpret our environments

In the most efficient and speedy manner.

Unfortunately, efficiency is not a synonym for empathy

Speed is not a hallmark of justice

And prognostication is not the stuff of friendship or love.

Some neuroscientists argue that empathetic listening

Requires no less than

A willful override of the brain’s preferred mode of operation.

It requires quelling our brain’s need for predictability.

It requires the courage

to let go of the old habits and embrace new ones.

While leadership and management professionals

Train CEOs in strategies of empathetic listening

That actually contribute to a company’s bottom line

To the delight of stockholder and investors,

Our Christian tradition like some others

Takes a different tact for confronting the spiritual fog that arises

When reason is drowned out

And truth becomes the enemy.

We call that approach discernment.

Few spiritual leaders in our tradition

Were more steeped in the process of discernment

Than Ignatius of Loyola.

I know, he’s a Jesuit and I’m a Franciscan

But desperate times call for desperate measures.

Ignatius called the various voices in our heads and our hearts,

These various motives that move us, “spirits.”

And he established a series of 22 guides or rules

To help in the discernment process

Distinguishing good from evil spirits.

Even Jesuits admit that engaging these various rules

undertaking such discernment is complex

requiring both time and the help of a wise director.

Since my homilies are already long enough

And I am no wise director in the ways of Jesuit spirituality

maybe we can begin with a simpler approach to discernment

starting with that single gospel principle

Jesus articulates today for discerning godly leadership:

come and see.

Jesus returns to this criterion later in Luke’s Gospel

When he tells the disciples of John the Baptist

Who wonders if he is the true messiah

To report what they have seen:

The blind see, the lame walk,

Those with leprosy are cured

The deaf hear, the dead are raised to life

And the good news is preached to the poor (Lk 7:22).

Matthew’s gospel compresses this verse even more

When in response to concerns about false prophets

Jesus says, “By your fruits you will know them” (Mt. 7:16)

As many of you remember, in April of 2019

a massive blaze at Paris’ Notre Dame Cathedral

devasted large parts of this icon of gothic architecture.

The process for rebuilding began almost immediately:

There were structural engineers overseeing the reinforcement

of weakened pillars and those famed flying buttresses.

Damaged scaffolding and debris were removed.

The great organ was dismantled for repair.

One task in the rebuilding of this famed space

Is to restore the building’s sonic signature[[2]](#endnote-2)

For Notre dame was not just a church;

It was also a world class concert hall

with a unique sound profile unlike any other.

To accomplish this planners and engineers

turned to the field of “heritage acoustics.”

This newly emerging science makes it possible

Not only to document the acoustics of a notable place

But also to recreate the sonic grandeur

Of destroyed or altered structures.

This effort at Notre Dame is greatly aided by the work

of Brian Katz and his team

who precisely mapped the sound in that space in 2013

and could thus generate an acoustic map for Notre Dame

now employed in the sonic restoration of this gothic jewel.

Heritage acoustics is a provocative metaphor

For thinking about Jesus resonance in these turbulent times

For testing an authentic Christ acoustic

And discerning with

what the mystic Rumi called, “the ear in the chest”[[3]](#endnote-3)

The good spirits from the bad,

enabling us along with the boy Samuel

To recognize the legitimate voices of the Holy Spirit

In the midst of so much dissonance and discord.

Mapping the divine sonority and acquiring a gospel acoustic

Is an ecclesial task achieved by a community of disciples

Attuned to each other on the journey

Especially to the poor and the marginalized

Whose cries found such resonance in the divine chest:

In the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

With Jesus’ instruction to “come and see” guiding us

We make this journey with eyes wide open:

Alert to visible fruits of the spirit

justice and care

Shared dignity and inclusion

And peaceability rather than violence

Violence that finds no home

In the teaching of the prince of peace.

The path of discernment is certainly not an easy one

Something that Martin Luther King Jr.

Whose birthday the nation celebrates tomorrow

Knew all too well.

But he walked that non-violent path

With eyes wide open

And a unique ear in the chest.

His gifts for discernment and bolding announcing

What he had seen and what he had heard

Ultimately cost him his life.

It was a sacrifice he was willing to make

So that God’s prophecy would be fulfilled

And justice would flow like a river (Amos 5:24).

On the bicentennial of our nation some 45 years ago

Broadway gifted us with the award winning musical 1776.

While a somewhat fictionalized version of the events

Leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence

Much of the play meets historical muster

Especially the depiction of John Adams

And his unrelenting quest to persuade all 13 colonies

To vote for independence.

In the penultimate musical moment of the show

Adams is alone on stage

And sings a poignant yet powerful piece that opens with the lines:

*Is anybody there?*

*Does anybody care?*

*Does anybody see what I see?*

Adams sings on to announce that the Rubicon is crossed

That this is now a time of commitment

And though his enemies all say he’ll rue the day

Through all the gloom, with threatening doom

He sees the rays of ravishing light and glory.

Some of us might today might feel a bit like John Adams

Or more recently like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Wondering if anybody is there

If anybody cares

If anybody is willing to go and see the way Jesus sees

Today’s liturgical plunge into this extraordinary time

Comes with the assurance that God is there

Calling us

Inviting us

Cajoling us to discern the good spirits

And renewing the promise that one day

There will be ravishing light and glory,

But only if we are prepared to join with the boy prophet

And with that myriad of other holy voices

who have joined this justice chorus throughout the ages

and respond, in word and deed,

Here I am, Lord, I come to do your holy will,

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

1. These ideas are summarized in “The Science of Listening,” https://www.kornferry.com/insights/articles/514-the-science-of-listening [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/notre-dame-cathedral-fire-legendary-acoustics-restoration> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “When Things are Heard,” *Night and Sleep,* eds. Coleman Banks and Robert Bly (Cambridge: Yellow Moon Press, 1981) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)