

The other day, I heard a story told by the first woman, Pam Flowers, to cross the arctic solo with her 8 sled dogs. She shared the story of one of her most spectacular days during the 11 months she was out there. It was just before she was crossing the Canadian border, and she described it like this. “We came around to this beautiful big beach. It looked so perfect. It looked like a superhighway in front of us, and I just got this idea. I thought, I’m gonna take Robert, my dog Robert, and I’m gonna put him up front beside my number one lead dog, Douggie Dog, and I’m going to give Robert the chance to show that he can learn commands. What could he possibly do wrong?”

About 5 minutes later we came around a corner and there up in a ravine off to the right was a mother polar bear and cub. They are about 100 yards away, and they are standing on this beautiful white snow with this perfect blue sky behind them, and it’s like a perfect picture, and I think, you know the dogs aren’t even going to see her. Well Robert’s is a bit of tourist, and he just happened to look off to the right, and he saw the bears and so now swings off to the right because he wants to go visit those bears. Now I’m sure that Robert thought those bears were dogs because dogs don’t really like bears. And I’m yelling at Douggie, ‘Ha, ha,’ which means ‘go left,’ so I’m yelling ‘ha, Douggie, ha,’ ‘cause I’m trying to get Dougie to take us away from the bears, but now the other six dogs see what Robert is seeing, and they decide they need to go see the bears. So now the whole team swings hard to the right, and...I’m standing on the break as hard as I can but it’s not working...[and] we are rocketing across this beach, and we get to the bottom of this ravine and the break [finally] bites, and we jerk to a halt, but now my lead dogs Douggie and Robert are only about 3 feet from this bear. And I’m like maybe 60 feet. And I’m yelling at Dougie, “ha, ha,” go to the left, but he doesn’t hear me because it’s just total chaos, and I have no control over anything that is happening.

And this bear is standing there looking at us, and she is not happy. And she looked at my dog Douggie, and she ran toward him in like a false charge, and she tried to stop before she hit him, but actually the ravine was so slick that she banged right into him and sent him tumbling to the bottom of the ravine taking the whole team with him. She turned around and hightailed it to her cub, and when the dogs saw her running away they tried to chase after her but they couldn’t quite get to her because the break is still in the snow. And now

this bear is getting really agitated, and the dogs are lunging and lurching and barking and barking, and she’s getting more and more agitated, and she starts to drool.

You would have to be there to see how much drool can come out of an agitated bears mouth. This is like four water faucets going off at the same time. And then she starts wagging her head and clawing at the snow. And then she makes this sound, “haaa.” I have always been told by native people that when a polar bear makes that sound they are getting serious and you better be ready. Amazingly I just got real calm and everything around me started happening in slow motion. I reached into my sled bag and I pulled out my shot gun, and I turned off the safety, and I aimed it at her. And I thought if she’s going to hurt one of my dogs, I’m going to shoot her.

And then everything stopped. It just got totally silent. No more barking. No more hissing. Just silence. And then the bear seemed to see me for the first time. She took one step toward me and looked at me with those coal black eyes. My stomach just lurched. And I stepped away from the sled one step, and I held out my hand and I said, “It’s ok. It’s ok. We’re going to go now.” And I swear I heard that bear say to me in my mind, “I don’t want to hurt you. I just want you to go.” And with that she walked to her den opening about 70 feet away and just slipped inside. And her little cub is running over there trying to catch up to mamma, and it got right beside the den opening, and now it had just had its first lesson in how to be a big tough polar bear, and it looked over at us and it went, “ha.” And then it jumped inside... So I ran and got the lines untangled and jumped on the sled said, “Alright now let’s go,” and I wanted so much distance between us and those polar bears that we didn’t stop for three hours. And it took me three days to stop shaking.”¹

As she finished her story, I couldn’t stop thinking about this powerful encounter and the moment when this woman and the polar bear heard each other in a way that seems utterly supernatural and was at the same time not supernatural at all. The communication was just so clear. So clear. Pam Flowers and that polar bear heard each other, and it saved some lives that day. There are so many ways to rationalize away this encounter, to explain away what happened other than accepting that Pam Flowers and the polar bear exchanged clear communication that transcended mere body language – and there was an awful lot of body language going on! The fact is, they *heard* each other.

This story got me thinking about what it means to hear. About what it means to hear God. About what it means to listen to the voice of Jesus.

Today’s lesson from the Gospel of John is about Jesus teaching the Pharisees about a shepherd and the sheep who listen to his voice and follow him because they know his voice. This teaching is in fact part of a larger story that we actually heard a number of weeks ago in the season of Lent. It’s part of the story of Jesus’ healing of the man born blind whose healing raised so many questions for the disciples, his neighbors, and the religious leaders. The healing of this man who had to tell his story over and over again while everyone else tried to make heads or tail of it. The healing of this man who was eventually rejected by his faith community, but who saw Jesus standing before him and worshipped him as Lord.

This story is all about sight and seeing the Lord Jesus face to face. And this story about sight becomes a story – a teaching moment – not about sight but about sound. About listening to the voice of Jesus. About hearing God.

So, how do we listen for the voice of Jesus? How do we hear God? Instead of just being on the lookout for God sightings, how can we tune our ears to the sound of the divine?

We obviously are invited to hear the voice of God in scripture. We might say, for example, that God spoke to us in some passage we heard or read or in a sermon or a reflection. Sometimes in church, instead of saying “The Word of the Lord,” we conclude our lessons with the phrase, “Listen to what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.” We call the bible, the living word because of its power to jump off the page and into our hearts for encouragement, for challenge, for conversion, and redemption. We hear God in scripture.

We are invited to hear the voice of Jesus in each other, when we listen to each other’s stories, experiences, encounters, hardships and joys. When we open our hearts to one another with vulnerability and courage, setting aside our own agendas, needs, wants, and compulsions to control or fix, and really listen, we hear God in the space between us.

We are invited to hear God in community because our listening ears need help discerning the many and mixed messages, distorted truths, and flat out lies that pervade our beautiful and broken world. In those times when we can’t hear for ourselves, when the

voice of God is so distant as to seem non-existent, when grief or pain or the overwhelming distractions of modern life buffer the sound, we hear God in community.

Finally, we are invited to hear God in creation. Some of the earliest Christian mystics and theologians believed that God speaks a word into each and every being – rock, bird, plant, animal, and that this word is what God “has to say” in and through each and every being – it is what “God is saying *to* it and *through* it in its interrelation to other beings.”² That word is there for our hearts to receive. We hear God in creation.

Sometimes when we are listening in these ways, perhaps it is rare – perhaps it has never happened to us – but sometimes we may hear in ways that seem truly supernatural, that seem beyond our regular day-in-day-out auditory capacity. There may be times when we receive a communication as crystal clear as the communication exchanged between Pam Flowers and that polar bear on the arctic beach that day, and we know that we have heard the Lord not metaphorically, but in the purest and truest way, we have heard the voice of God. How often then do our rational brains, so-called enlightened minds, empirically-driven cultural impulses kick in and we question what our bodies knew in that moment to be unequivocally true until we’re sure we were just making it up or are too embarrassed to share.

But what if we were designed to hear in exactly those sorts of ways, not in a moment of supernatural grace, but as a matter of how we were created to be, as beings reconciled to God in Christ who came that we might life live to the fullest, deeply connected to God, to ourselves, to others, and to all of creation? I am increasingly convinced that this is true of us. That we were designed for exactly this type of hearing and that by practicing deep listening in scripture, in the space between us, in community and in creation, we increasingly tune our ears to the sound of the divine. We were created for this – to listen to the voice of Jesus. We were created to hear God.

¹ <https://themoth.org/stories/alone-across-the-arctic>

² Bruce V. Foltz. *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible*. Fordham University Press. 2014. P. 169, 180.