



SIEBENQUELL

Voices



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I recently had a series of lengthy telephone conversations with a young man who had a serious if not surprising problem. His faith in God was shaken. He had navigated the storm of the pandemic fairly well, but with the latest extension of the lockdown, something had changed. As he put it: »These days have battered me so badly. Everything seems to be unstable, nothing seems to be reliable. I see little cause of hope. I keep wondering where God is in my struggle.« Later, after many conversations, he posed a question to me. »Do you have a story of God you turn to when your faith in God is shaken?«

I hesitated. Indeed, I have such a story. I have turned to it every time I have found myself engulfed in unmanageable and overwhelming crisis. I hesitated, because this is an intensely personal moment in my relationship to God, and we should be filled with caution and reverence before sharing such moments. They are easily trampled underfoot by insensitive, superficial and coarse human beings. Yet, I also hesitated, because it is not the kind of biblical story we would expect to hear in such an hour. Unlike Psalm 23 with the Lord as our shepherd, or a story where Jesus brings storms to an abrupt end and commands winds and waves to stand down, my beloved story takes place in the middle of the storm. I seldom share it, because it usually disappoints the expectations of the listener. This is not story for those who want instant relief and an immediate resolution of their problems. I have craved those things as much as anyone else, but in the deep darkness of my doubt, I

have always turned to a story that satisfies none of that craving, but feeds something much deeper, at least for me. It is found in Exodus 19, 16-20.

And it happened on the third day as it turned morning, that there was thunder and lightning and a heavy cloud on the mountain and the sound of the ram's horn, very strong, and all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought out the people toward God from the camp and the stationed themselves at the bottom of the mountain. And Mount Sinai was all in smoke, because the Lord had come down on it in fire, and its smoke went up like the smoke from a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And the sound of the ram's horn grew stronger and stronger. Moses would speak, and God would answer him with voice. And the Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the mountaintop, and the Lord called Moses to the mountaintop, and Moses went up.

This story is situated in the giving of the Ten Words (the Decalogue). Great things are happening, Great changes are coming. Upheaval is coming for a people set on old ways, too deeply attached to ways that cannot lead to life and too loosely attached to the relationships that flow from the heart of the God of the covenant. It is a story filled with all the drama of great crisis, magnificent and overwhelming at the same time. The experience is terrifying for the people caught up in it. It is a story of sensory overload. So many impressions, so many experiences and no time to process any of it. Thunder and the blaring of the ram's horn assail the ears. Lightening and fire overwhelm their eyes, while heavy cloud and smoke then shrouds what those eyes can see. It is an experience that they do not just perceive in their minds, but feel in their bodies. It makes not just a mountain (v. 19) but a people (V. 17) tremble. It saps the courage of the people and generates panic, fear and anxiety. In the midst of all this earth-shaking, life-altering experience there is a tiny moment that can easily get lost. It is tucked away in the folds of the story and is nothing less than extraordinary. It is as if the storyteller has frozen all the action of the story in a freeze frame moment and offers us a gentle aside: **Moses would speak, and God would answer him with voice.**

This is the story I turn to when my faith needs restoration. It does not appease me with saccharine reassurances that better days are coming. It does not comfort me with tales of what life will be like once this storm is over. It is not a feel good story that shows me how everything will turn out and grant us a happy ending. Instead of telling me a tale about what life will be like after the crisis, this story tells me a story right from the very core of it, while all the tumult is whirling around me. It tells me a tale I am experiencing here and now. It is a story I need now, while I am in the midst of my storm. Future calm is enticing, but hardly alters the fact of the battering I am undergoing at the moment. I crave peace and quiet like everyone else, but it is hardly that useful while thunder fills me ears and lightening startles my eyes and that damn ram's horn keeps blaring on and on and on while the earth shakes under my feet. To be lead to the pastures green and quiet waters is not my prevalent concern while my heart is trembling.

And what can be found the midst of my tumult is this: **Moses would speak, and God would answer him with voice.** It strengthens my relationship of trust with God for three reasons.

1. My tiny, unprepossessing solitary human voice can break through all the din. In a world in which I have found my ability to control and lessen, let alone stop the cacophony around me to be less than impressive, I find this the most reassuring. It reminds me of the power of the human voice in the relationship to God, for through this voice the relationship is created, maintained, deepened, healed and accompanied. It is easy to assume that it can be easily be drowned out by the din of life and storm and crisis, but that is not so.

2. My tiny, unprepossessing solitary human voice is heard by God. This comforts me deeply, because it reminds me that I do not have to turn down the volume and silence the noisy, voluble distractions in order to be heard. My voice is heard, like Moses' was, because there things that are more important to God than we imagine. All of this racket is caused because God is preparing the way of the gift of the Ten Words. But despite their importance and value, it does not make him deaf to

one meek human voice. I have had moments when I have been so engrossed in achieving a goal that it made me overhear the voices around me. But that is not God's story with me.

3. I find a divine voice responding to me. The Torah says, that God would answer Moses with voice. God answers with words, not with unintelligible noise. A voice is not an imposing sound, like thunder, nor a penetrating sound like a ram's horn. Yet, unlike these things, a voice is a personal sound, the sound that's relationship possible. This exchange of speech takes place against the most intense background noise of thunder and the constantly mounting blast of the ram's horn. It is endowed with a wondrous audibility. God offers no sign to Moses, but his voice. Here the covenant gift of conversation is born. The dark clouds do not part and the earth under my feet does not cease to move. But there is a voice, responsive to me, my fear and my troubles. Voices are like fingerprints, one of a kind, unmistakable and never interchangeable. So too, the divine voice in my life. To know that God answers me with voice reassures me at levels that even the deepest crisis cannot touch.

Moses would speak, and God would answer him with voice.

When I had finished telling the young man about the story that restores my faith in God in the hour of crisis, I quickly tagged on an apology. »I know it is not what most people want to hear, but it works for me.« He responded by saying: »You should tell that story to others.«

I just did.

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