

Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 17, 2016

The religious authorities are pushing Jesus to speak plainly. But all they can hear is what they have antennae for. Everything else Jesus has said has been lost on them. But Jesus has his own voice. He may borrow shepherd and sheep language from past Scripture, like Psalm 23, but his language is framed in the light of his own experience. He is speaking plainly, telling what it is like to bring true hope to those who can receive it. And herein is an invitation for each of us.

Those of us who grew up in the Christian tradition learned to talk about Jesus in inherited language. It may have been the language of Jesus as a personal Savior, or the language of Jesus as true God and true man. I think it's important to have official church language about Jesus. But I also think believers should find their own voice about what they have received. Faith seeks understanding. What we have received as faith, we have to appropriate as understanding. A real faith that struggles with real understanding needs a real voice.

How does this play out? Recently, I had an encounter with a person who told me she had lost her faith. As the conversation went deeper, I began to see that her understanding of God as a child was not able to grow up with her. The result? Her childhood God no longer seemed relevant to her adult life. And so, I've come to believe that what some see as a loss of faith has more to do with the inability to build a bridge between a child's catechism and an adult's experience. For such people, the notion that experiences in their daily lives could actually be a window into the mind and heart of God is a revolutionary concept. I tell them that a relationship with God in my life would not be possible without my own experience of finding traces of God in the world around me. The language of God is the experience God writes into our lives.

One of God's great gifts is the sense of wonder and beauty, of love and longing, that seems hard-wired into us as children. The challenge is not how we should remain children, but how we can grow up and dream again.

When it comes to finding our own voice, there is a Jewish teaching story that repays meditation. When Rabbi Zusya grew old and knew that his time on earth was short, his students gathered around him. One asked him if he was afraid of dying. "I am afraid of what God will ask me," the Rabbi said. "What will he ask you?" "He will not ask me, 'Zusya, why were you not like Moses?'" He will ask me, 'Zusya, why were you not Zusya?'"