

Erin Hensley  
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Proper 9, Year A  
Matthew 11:16-19

### Standing in the Room

I have to confess that I really like watch television, especially comedy or drama. One of my favorite series is Joan of Arcadia, which aired on CBS from 2003-2005. The basic premise of the show is Joan Girardi, a high school teenager ends up hearing from God through the voices of all sorts of people. Her family already has some issues to deal with: her dad is not new chief of police in the town of Arcadia, her brother Luke is quite the nerd, her brother Kevin was paralyzed in a car accident, and her mom is almost always flustered. In the show, God is actively speaking to Joan in all kinds of characters ranging from a janitor, a five-year-old girl with pigtails, and an upperclassman wearing all leather, makeup, and some piercings to boot. In every episode I thought I knew how or in whom God would show up. And more often than not, my expectations were dashed. Even in the last episode, when Joan was in the hospital, the unexpected happened. I thought surely there would be a single new voice, a new word. But instead, all the characters that had offered words from God to her stood around her bed and kept vigil

with her. I was left not knowing the resolution. I expected God to speak loudly and clearly that last episode, but I was left with mystery instead.

And the Israelites had expectations about how God would show himself in the time of the Messiah. Many thought the forerunner of the Messiah would be jovial, lighthearted, and exuberant of the one to come. But John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin was no such person. John the Baptist "wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey" (Matthew 3:4) and in the wilderness he proclaimed "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2). The people played the flute for him; the people expected him to join in their wedding games, to share in their joy. But John the Baptist did not dance.

Jesus the Messiah did. Many thought the Messiah would be cosmically grand, casting down the lowly with great might. But Christ Jesus was no such person. Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. He lingered at dinner parties with the politically powerful, the loud and lowly, and everyone in between. He healed anyone who was sick and came to him seeking help, even on the Sabbath. Jesus, dare I say it, enjoyed

life. He had friends and spoke his truth in love. The people wailed; the people expected the Messiah to join in their funeral games, to share in their severe anger and sadness. But Jesus did not walk around weeping.

Our spiritual ancestors thought they knew what the messengers of God would be like. They thought they knew what kind of help would come, more specifically, they thought they knew what God in their midst would look like.

If I am honest with myself and honest with you, there are times when I am sure I know how God will arrive. I will ask God to work something out, to make a way out of a situation that feels like I have no way. But in my sleeping and in my waking, I dream of a certain person acting a certain way and by a certain time, too, of course. My words to God are “work it out,” but my heart really wants the other person to agree with me, to be more like me. I convince myself that there is only one way for God to be.

Biblical scholar Dale Allison writes, “We may sometimes be tempted to suppose that God is at work primarily or even exclusively in those who look like us. In the present text,

however, God is at work in John and Jesus, and they did not look like each other. The two men had different ministries with different emphases. One celebrated the kingdom by eating and drinking at table; the other chose an ascetically lifestyle out in the wilderness. The differences between the two were indeed so great that John could wonder whether Jesus was really the one his inspired imagination had foreseen (Matt 11:2-4). And yet the same God was after all active in both.”<sup>1</sup> *And yet the same God was after all active in both.*

God was active in both John the Baptist and in Jesus. This reality is part of the larger reality that “God meets human diversity with divine diversity.” In other words, God speaks in numerous ways because God’s people hear in numerous ways. God knows that God needs all sorts and kinds of ministries to speak to all sorts and kinds of God’s people. This means that not one person can reach all people. There is no single speaker, there is no single way of speaking, and there is no single ministry that will meet everyone’s needs. God will raise up all sorts of voices to get God’s message of love and compassion

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary by Dale Allison from Working Preacher.org for July 6, 2008  
[www.workingpreacher.org/preaching\\_print.aspx?commentary\\_id=105](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching_print.aspx?commentary_id=105) accessed on June 27.

across to God's diverse and interdependent creation. And this reality is cause to celebrate.

Why? Because this means I don't have to try and pretend that what I say will always be what every one needs. I don't need to make my ministry as a priest exactly like another priest's ministry. And you don't have to making your ministry exactly like anyone else's either. You don't have to parent exactly like anyone else, teach like anyone else, organize your projects, or cook for your family like anyone else. Yes, in all ministry in Christ's name we are to go about them lovingly, but not in the same manner or at the same time.

The reality of God's activity in diverse voices means that we can ask the question "what would Jesus have me do or say?" rather than "What would Jesus have him do or say?" The reality of God's activity in diverse voices means that rather than being disgruntled about who we can't reach, we can be thankful for those other voices. Rather than being angry with those whose ears we can't reach, we trust our speaking is not in vein. When we don't understand someone, we trust that our listening is not in vain. For God keeps sending messengers. God keeps acting. God keeps calling our names, standing in the room,

seeking relationship with us in ways we could never expect or imagine.

There is that of God in everyone. In those you love, in those you can't stand, in your very being. God does not ask for you or I to be the savior. God asks you and I to embrace the diverse ways in which god lives and breathes in this world. You have a particular way of speaking and particular way of listening to the divine. So keep you eyes, ears, mind, and heart open. Let your voice loose with care and in love. There is someone who needs your voice and there is someone who has the words you need to hear.