

## **"The Spiritual Practice of Finding Your Voice"**

**Luke 2:41-52**

**July 12, 2020**

*Humans are unique by the way we use words to communicate. While other intelligent life forms use their voices to send messages, it is when we find language-and our own voices, that we begin to individualize. Listen to the story of when the young man Jesus finds his voice and begins to share it with the world. From Luke's Gospel, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter, beginning with the 41<sup>st</sup> verse, hear what the Spirit is saying to the church:*

Every year Jesus' parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up as they always did for the Feast. When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn't know it. Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbors. When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem looking for him.

The next day they found him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers. But his parents were not impressed; they were upset and hurt.

His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you."

He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they had no idea what he was talking about.

So he went back to Nazareth with them, and lived obediently with them. His mother held these things dearly, deep within herself. And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people.

*Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

Let me tell you the story of two young people and how they each find their voice. Each allow the prophets of their day to inform them, speak for them and unlock their own words.

The boy Jesus is not yet of adult age in Jewish culture when he finds his way into the Temple of Jerusalem during the Feast of Passover in about the year 12 or maybe 15. Masses of faithful Jews travel each year to the holy city for Passover. They bring animals to be sacrificed as a ritual of purification. They bring money for the Temple treasury; they bring their prayers to God. They come in devotion and excitement, anxious to immerse themselves in the spectacle and to worship God in the common areas of the Temple.

Pilgrims come from all over the ancient lands for the yearly Passover, some of them from hundreds of miles away. Jerusalem is teeming with people for seven nights; it is easy for children to get lost or separated from their parents during this time.

Jesus is 12 years old, says Luke. 12, and he is reading with, and asking questions of, the Temple rabbis. He is unlocking his jaws and finding his own voice. From then on, says Luke, Jesus "[goes] back to Nazareth with his parents, and live[s] obediently with them." His mother holds these things dearly—her private, mother-time with him, deep within herself. "And Jesus mature[s], growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people."

I wish we knew more. If only Luke had painted us a picture of *how* Jesus matures in body and spirit, shown us signs of how he is blessed by God and blessed by people during these years. What are the precious moments enjoyed by father and son and mother and son? Does Jesus laugh and live the carefree life of a teen boy? Does he go on teaching his teachers and reaching for God in the scripture stories he is told by them? Just how *does* Jesus find his voice that next makes itself heard when he faces off against the devil in the wilderness? I think if we knew the answers to these questions, it might help us find our own truth in our private conversations with God and against the devil voices of others who mean to do us harm.

Dag Hammarskjold, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Swedish diplomat, once said, "I don't know what or who put the question, and I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment, I did answer, "Yes."" I wonder when *Jesus'* moment was, and at that moment, just to *what exactly* did he say "yes?" You see, I think that's the danger in finding -and using- your voice. It may be a grand and glorious notoriety you seek or find; your words have the potential to put you in quotation books and in framed sayings on someone else's desk; your voice may be publicly echoed back over your grave at the time of your burial service or found privately later in an anniversary or birthday card kept in your Beloved's scrapbook. Your words have the power to heal the broken hearts of others. You need only believe it to engage the Spiritual Practice of Finding Your Voice.

Unfortunately, your words may be the last straw in an already tenuous relationship, the bridge broken between you and your parent, your spouse, your friend, your neighbor or your people. Finding and using your voice in conflict can be a dicey and dangerous proposition. Had Jesus known his words would separate him from the religious teachers he once held in high regard, if he had known that his own people would turn against him and that his best friends would betray him and desert him, if he had known that his voice was to be silenced in a cruel and lonely death, would he have spoken up? Would he have tamped down his rhetoric? Would he have challenged power so directly and threateningly?

The Gospel writers picture Mother Mary at the foot of the cross, grieving loudly for the loss of her son. Does she wish that Jesus had minded his Ps and Qs in the face of power? Does she hope against hope that heaven's angels will swoop in at the heroic last minute and whisk him away from his fate? Does she know that Jesus cannot be silenced after all, that his body might be stilled but his words will live on, generation after generation, nation after nation, heart of his very heart, Spirit and God willing?

Luke's story of young Jesus is the only pre-adult story of Jesus in our New Testament. The metaphor is clear from the story, though the story itself is unlikely, for a boy of 12 not yet to the bar mitzvah age of 13 years would never be allowed to read with the rabbis in the Temple. A boy 12 years old has no "voice" in religious circles. Luke is writing to the early followers of post-Christ. He tells them in this story to respect the early foundations of their Jewish heritage—on which is founded their family tradition, but their genuine strength and maturity is to be found in their own voice, the voice inspired by the life and message of Jesus the Christ, that God is love and it is love that will ultimately save them.

Another young man learns an important truth as he finds his own voice in the words of a 20<sup>th</sup> century prophet. American singer Bruce Springsteen is an unlikely American hero for a Pakistani boy living in racially hostile town near London. Javed is just 16 years old. He has a voice, but he has never learned to use it outside of the poems he writes alone in his bedroom and tacks to his bulletin board. A teacher, a girlfriend, a fellow "Paki," a fundamental contest of wills with his father and the scourge of racial intolerance all converge to awaken the closeted poet to speak his words into the world.

He wants to be a good son for his mum and dad. He lives in obedience to his father, though he does not have a close relationship with him. In their Pakistani culture, the father speaks for the entire family and makes all the decisions for them. Javed accepts this as both a fact and a fate, but he hates that his voice is neither respected nor heard at home. What he values, what he wants for his life is to be a writer. What he cares deeply about is of absolutely no interest to his father, who will soon determine his son's life work, who he will marry and where he will live. Javed describes his dad as, "being stuck in another century," where no one but the family patriarch is allowed any opinions. Javed's hopes and dreams do not count within his family structure.

For his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday he is given a pair of black slacks and a matched box set of a dress shirt and tie, signaling that it is time for him to become a man of commerce, to make his parents proud by being an industrious earner. He sees no pathway for making his dreams a reality, despite that his teacher encourages him to pursue being a career writer. She says, "Writers tell the world something it needs to hear. You have a responsibility to make your voice heard." This is a truth Javed cannot hear, for in his lived experience, the only voice that counts in his life is that of his father.

The young man sees no road to self-differentiation until his Paki friend, Roops, gives him two cassette tapes of the music of the American singer-songwriter, Bruce Springsteen. Javed listens to the words of Springsteen's songs and in them he finds his own voice. He hears another man from another culture singing his life, his distresses, hopes and dreams. The words give him courage to speak his own truth to his friends, to the racists who threaten him, to his father and most importantly, to his own heart.

Music can do that, you know. Music tugs at our souls, lifts our spirits and gives us myriad reasons to discover our own voices, even if—no *especially if*—they are a bit off-key.

Bruce sings, "Talk about a dream, try to make it real." (*Badlands*) This is Javed's anthem in the film, "Blinded by the Light," that it is in his speaking aloud about *his* dreams—separate from his father's—that he begins to make them real.

In the trailer to Springsteen's autobiographical film, "Western Stars," he says the following about finding one's own way through life:

Change — how do you change yourself? The older you get, the heavier that baggage gets that you haven't sorted through, so you run. I've done a lot of that kind of running. I've spent 35 years trying to learn how to let go of the destructive parts of my character, and I still have days when I struggle with it. We all have our broken pieces. Emotionally, spiritually, in this life, nobody gets away unharmed. We're always trying to find somebody whose broken pieces fit with our broken pieces and something whole emerges.

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The Spiritual Practice of Finding your voice begins with self-examination, with believing your dreams can become your reality. Jesus said you do this by stepping into love—love of God, love of self, love of others. He says, "Go find the people who have the most broken pieces and fit them with yours." His prophets inform him just as our prophets inform us. The scriptures inform us all. I asked the kids to think about a prophet's words that they hear from me every week.

Micah, a prophet of the 7<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, exhorts the people to "do justice, love kindness (or mercy) and walk humbly with God." His historical context is not relevant to us today, but his words are. This is proof that we never know how our words-our voice-may outlive us and inspire others. Don't be afraid to use yours. Your dreams just might become another's life-saving reality.

I wonder if Jesus' father said to him what Javed's father said to his son nineteen centuries later. Malik Khan eventually reconciles his rigid authoritarian voice with his soft inner heart-voice, a voice full of love for his boy. He says to him, "Son, go write your stories. Just don't forget ours."

Engage the Spiritual Practice of Finding Your Voice and see what doors open for you. It is not too late—it is never too late to find yours. "Talk about a dream, try to make it real." As Ms. Clay witnesses to Javed and as Jesus calls to us as disciples, "You have a responsibility to make your voice heard."

*May it Be So.*

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