

# **“Cutting Through Static and Clutter”**

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## **Psalms 130 (Common English Bible)**

<sup>1</sup> I cry out to you from the depths, LORD —

<sup>2</sup> my Lord, listen to my voice! Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy!

<sup>3</sup> If you kept track of sins, LORD —

my Lord, who would stand a chance?

<sup>4</sup> But forgiveness is with you — that's why you are honored.

<sup>5</sup> I hope, LORD.

My whole being hopes, and I wait for God's promise.

<sup>6</sup> My whole being waits for my Lord —

more than the night watch waits for morning;

yes, more than the night watch waits for morning!

<sup>7</sup> Israel, wait for the LORD!

Because faithful love is with the LORD;

because great redemption is with our God!

<sup>8</sup> He is the one who will redeem Israel from all its sin.

## **John 10:1-10 (Common English Bible)**

<sup>1</sup> I assure you that whoever doesn't enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. <sup>2</sup> The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup> The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup> Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup> They won't follow a stranger but will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice."

<sup>6</sup> Those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn't understand what he was saying. <sup>7</sup> So Jesus spoke again, "I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. <sup>8</sup> All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn't listen to them. <sup>9</sup> I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life — indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.

At this moment, perhaps a dozen television programs are passing through you from head to toe — perhaps the Olympics, or a Sunday morning news program, or an infomercial for a fitness product, or "The Andy Griffith Show." And at this moment the voice of a 9-1-1 dispatcher is moving through your head from ear to ear. And at this moment, gamma rays are penetrating your gums, and X-rays are exiting your body as fast as they enter.

Can you feel it? Can you hear it? Can you see it? Of course not. I'm talking about electromagnetic radiation. At every moment of our lives, we're being bombarded by natural radiation from the heavens — visible and ultraviolet light, gamma and X-rays. Most of it is filtered out by Earth's atmosphere. A portion of the radiation makes it

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through the air and passes right through us without us having the slightest idea that it's doing so — unless, that is, we spend too much time unprotected from the sunshine's ultraviolet light and our skin turns beet red or chalky white. Unbeknownst to us, we spend our days immersed in a bath of natural radiation.

And for the past century, humankind has generated artificial radiation, first in the form of radio waves, then television signals. Now course, we're adding electromagnetic radiation with every mobile phone and electronic tablet, radio systems for police and fire departments, remote controls for televisions and garages and car doors, and Doppler weather radar and the Ohio Highway Patrol's speed gun. Like the waves of natural radiation, these manufactured signals are all around us — indeed, many of them go right through us. But we hardly notice. Why?

Our bodies don't notice all those signals because we're not built to recognize them. We don't tune in to them (unless you have quirky fillings in your teeth). So we go about our lives oblivious to these various signals that are communicating with our TV or cell phone. And that's probably just as well. Can you imagine if we had to sort through the signals of all those cell phone conversations and radio talk shows and TV infomercials in order to figure out what we ourselves were hearing or saying or thinking?

Years ago in a movie called "What Women Want," Mel Gibson played a chauvinistic, stuck-on-himself advertising agency hotshot named Nick. In a freak household accident Nick sustains a blow to the head. It's not long before Nick realizes that his accident has enabled him to hear the *thoughts* of women! As he walks by them, Nick can *hear* what they're *thinking*: thinking about him, about their clothes, about their jobs, about last night. For the first part of the film Nick struggles to be able to sort out his own inner voice from all the voices he hears in his mind.

I wonder if our lives aren't a lot more like Nick's than we realize. I mean, our world is not growing quieter and calmer. It seems that almost every device we use in our daily lives gives off noise or light. More and more restaurants are hanging blaring televisions the way they used to hang potted ferns.

I remember attending a party at Dave & Buster's restaurant in Westlake. The front end of that enormous place was noisy enough with the pool tables and crowds of party-goers and televisions. We proceeded to the back half of the building into the game room — a room the size of a football field with the couple hundred video games and arcade attractions. There are enough flashing neon signs and sirens and bells and blaring music and strobe lights and buzzers to rival Times Square! At one point in the evening a friend said, "I have to get out of here — I'm overdosing on stimulation."

In that hailstorm of arcade havoc, it *was* hard to hear yourself think, much less hear what your neighbor was saying to you.

*That* is what modern life is like much of the time.

So we're faced with two problems: on the one hand, there are signals all around us that we are unaware of because we're not tuned into them; and on the other hand, we are so bombarded by signals and messages and appeals in our daily lives that we

struggle to tune them out! That is just what this morning's gospel reading was talking about.

The tenth chapter of John's gospel features the only parable that John includes in his gospel – quite a change from the other three gospels which are full of parables Jesus told. But in John Chapter 10 Jesus tells a parable – a story – of a figure who serves like a shepherd to people who are like the flock placed under his care. The parable describes how this shepherd leads the sheep out of the security of the sheep fold, leading them in safety and peace into a world that's unpredictable and not entirely controllable. Listen again to part of the parable:

"The man who goes in through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.... The sheep hear his voice as he calls his own out. When he has brought them out, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they know his voice. They will not follow someone else; instead they will run away from such a person, because they do not know his voice."<sup>2</sup>

Just as we name our household pets, Palestinian shepherds had names for most or all of their sheep: names like "Black Leg," "Double Spot," "Long Ears," and the like. He recognized each sheep, and in time they recognized his presence and his voice. If someone other than the shepherd were to call out the sheep's name, the sheep wouldn't respond because its name didn't sound like its name unless it came from the shepherd's voice. But when they heard "that" voice, they responded. It wasn't uncommon for several shepherds to pen their sheep together for the night, and each morning, when they would lead all the sheep out of the pen, the sheep would sort themselves out because they would follow their master's voice.

But remember, they could *hear* the master's voice because they were *accustomed to listening* for it.

The voice of Jesus calls us. Jesus calls us to live our lives for God rather than to wander aimlessly without purpose. But so many people have a hard time hearing it. So many have difficulty responding to Jesus, difficulty obeying him.

Here's where I think their difficulty comes from. Remember that we go through our daily lives unaware of the ever-present bombardment of electromagnetic radiation because we're not tuned into it. In the same way, too many people don't hear the call of Jesus because they're not aware that it's there – they're not *trying* to listen for God. They believe they can go through life self-sufficiently, because they have convinced themselves that they know better than anyone else what's best for them. They believe that they certainly know better than some creature they can't see named "God." Who is this "God," they wonder, who has the audacity to claim responsibility and concern for them? Consequently, many people don't hear the call of Jesus because, as far as they're concerned, it doesn't exist. It's like just so much electromagnetic radiation – how can the call of Jesus be out there if there's no visible sign of it anywhere?

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<sup>2</sup> John 10:2-5

The other reason people have difficulty responding to the call of Jesus to live lives for God is simply that they can't sort out the voice of Jesus from all the other communication clutter.

- Jesus is being drowned out by the static of entertainment media.
- He's being obscured by the preponderance of our possessions that bury us.
- He's being pushed aside by the scurrying schedules that keep us scampering so much that we have no time to "be still and know that I am God," as scripture urges.

But friends, in the last ten minutes we've already begun to overcome one of those obstacles: you and I are aware that Jesus is calling us. He is calling us to live our lives for God – to serve God's will rather than merely trying always to satisfy our wants and pleasures. Just like someone who becomes aware of electromagnetic radiation's pervasiveness in our world, we've discovered that Jesus is calling all people.

And now that we know that he's calling, we need to figure out how we can hear him amid the din of hurried, busy, pressured, chaotic lives. Like Nick the advertising fellow with the unsettling ability to hear all the thoughts of every woman he passes, we need to figure out how to cut through the clutter and focus on what's important. One way is to make time for sabbath in our lives.

There are lots of thoughtful books lifting up the practice of observing a sabbath – a regular day of rest from our normal activities that makes space for reflection and worship. There are practical ways of doing that. Turning off your cellphone for a day or an afternoon, or even for a few hours can be freeing and restorative... after you get over the anxiety of being "offline" if even for just a while.

And I've heard of people who explored uncluttering their lives through a very practical means. They approached "un-cluttering" as a spiritual practice. Cleaning out closets and attics and garages, and un-cluttering countertops and cupboards and shelves was, for them, a means for bringing sabbath rest and restoration into their lives. The spiritual discipline of observing Sabbath can help clear our minds of a lot of junk that clogs our thinking and obscures our ability to perceive God's will for our lives.

Think how refreshing that would be, to un-clutter your life.... You would feel a sense of accomplishment. You would get rid of some guilt that has nagged at you for a while. And you would clear your office, your home, your mind, your heart, your soul to hear the voice of the shepherd calling you to follow him.

Realize this: we've already accomplished the first step! We know that God is calling to us through Jesus Christ the Son.

Like the sheep who recognize their shepherd, let us hear and heed the invitation of Jesus to follow his lead, trust his guidance, rest in the security of his protection. Let us know Christ's unconditional acceptance, and be encouraged and energized by his love.