

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

February 19, 2023 – EPIPHANY LAST, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: “*Our Master’s Voice*”*

Exodus 24:12-18 (The Glory of the Lord is revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai)
Psalm 99 (God spoke to His people out of a pillar of cloud)
2 Peter 1:16-21 (St. Peter witnesses to hearing God’s voice on the mountain)
St. Matthew 17:1-9 (Jesus is transfigured on the mountaintop)

Anyone here remember the RCA Victor dog, “Nipper”? The mixed-breed fox terrier was born in 1884 in Bristol, England, and died in 1895. He was named “Nipper” because he would bite the backs of visitors’ legs. Nipper originally lived with his owner, Mark Henry Barraud, at the Prince’s Theatre, where Barraud was a scenery designer. When Mark died, his brother Francis inherited Nipper, along with a cylinder phonograph and a number of recordings of Mark’s voice. Francis noted that the dog took a peculiar interest in the recorded voice of his late master as it emanated from the trumpet. So he decided to commit the image to canvas. In early 1899, Francis Barraud applied to copyright his painting, titled “Dog looking at and listening to a Phonograph.”

The Gramophone Company purchased it for 100 pounds sterling, and retitled the picture “His Master’s Voice.” That image continued to be used as a trademark by Victor in the US, Canada, and Latin America, and then by Victor’s successor, RCA.¹

When Rick and I moved to upstate New York was the first time I had seen a large Nipper statue on top of what is now the Arnoff Moving and Storage building in Albany. The four-ton, 26-foot-tall steel and fiberglass Nipper so dominates the cityscape that an air-traffic beacon is affixed to his right ear and he is the state capital’s most recognizable landmark.²

Today’s Gospel lesson reminded me of Nipper intently listening to the gramophone recording of his master’s voice, because in St. Matthew’s account of Christ’s Transfiguration (v. 5), God speaks and says: “This is my beloved Son ... listen to him.” Jesus’ disciples are instructed by God the Father to listen to their Master’s voice. So, how should we listen to Jesus?

A communications expert writes: “Listening is one of the most important skills you can have. How well you listen has a major impact on your job effectiveness, and on the quality of your relationships with others. We listen to obtain information. We listen to understand. We listen for enjoyment. And we listen to learn. Given all this listening we do, you would think we’d be good at it! In fact most of us are not, and research suggests that we remember only 25 to 50 percent of what we hear.”

“That means, when you talk to your neighbors, customers, or spouse for 10 minutes, they’re paying attention to less than half of the conversation. Pretty dismal! Turn it around,” the author continues, “and this reveals that when you are receiving directions or being presented with information, you aren’t hearing the whole message either.”³

Psychologists tell us there is a difference between simply hearing someone talk, and engaging in active listening. “Active listening” started as a communications technique used in counseling, training, and conflict resolution.⁴ It requires listeners to give the speaker their undivided attention and avoid being distracted, either by things around them, or by mentally preparing a counter-argument they can’t wait to introduce as soon as the person stops talking.

The listener also feeds back to the speaker what they have heard, by re-stating or paraphrasing the message in their own words. And finally, the listener is to respond appropriately, in an open, honest, and respectful way.⁵

This technique is helpful for listening better to one another. But let's go back to today's Gospel, where we are exhorted to listen actively to Jesus Christ. In John 10:27-28, Jesus shows us the rewards of doing so. He says: "My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one will snatch them from my hand."

In these verses, Our Lord tells us three things about us (the sheep), and three things about Himself (the Shepherd):⁶

- First, Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice"—we need to be receptive to Jesus when He calls, and when He leads us in certain directions rather than others.
- Second: Jesus says, "I know them"—this intimacy with us is the Lord's loving response to our faith.
- Third: Jesus says, "And they follow me"—to listen to Jesus is to actively *obey* Him.

Now, about the Shepherd:

- First, Jesus says, "I give them eternal life"—when we listen to, and obey Christ, we are delivered from danger and death, both now and in eternity.
- Second, Jesus says, "They will never perish"—listening to, and following Jesus faithfully will bring us to everlasting life.
- Third, Jesus says, "no one with snatch them from my hand," or, as St. Paul puts it (in Romans 8:39), "nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

So, we've looked at a better way to listen to each other, and at the spiritual benefits of listening to Jesus. However, the second half of this equation is: In what ways does God communicate with us that we need to be actively listening for? Or, how does the Lord speak to us?

Well, I'll say it again: Prayer is us speaking to God, the Bible is God speaking to us. Primarily, God speaks to us through the words of Holy Scripture—another reason all Christians should read the Bible daily, or at least weekly.

But God can also get through to us when we simply sit quietly and wait for Him to speak. Remember: He says in Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God," and in 1 Kings 19:12, the prophet Elijah discovered that God did not speak in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire, but in "the still small voice." The Lord also speaks to us as we pray—something else we should do daily, if not weekly.

There are times when God talks to us as we are receiving the Holy Eucharist. Some of us hear the Lord's voice when we are out enjoying nature. And, if we take both Jesus and Mother Teresa seriously, we can also see and hear God in the face and voice of every person who is suffering or in need. The truth is, God will get through to us by any means possible, if only we are open to listening for His voice.

Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner, who passed away in August 2022, recalled one low time in his life when God broke through in an unusual way. "I remember sitting parked by the roadside," Buechner wrote, "terribly depressed and fearful about my daughter's illness and what was going on in our family." As he sat there brooding about his daughter's sickness, he noticed a car that seemed to come from nowhere. His message from God, the word Buechner most needed to see at that moment, appeared on the car's rear license plate. On it was "the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I needed most to hear right then." It was the word TRUST.

There alongside the highway, God's message was revealed on the license plate of a passing car. Was it something to laugh off as a joke life plays on us every once in a while? Or was it the Word of God? Pastor Buechner wondered. "I'm willing to believe that maybe it was something of both," he concluded, but for him it was "an epiphany" that helped turn him around, emotionally.

He found out later, the owner of the car was a trust officer at a local bank. Because, after reading about Buechner’s experience, the trust officer paid a personal visit to the pastor one afternoon. He presented Buechner with the license plate that bore the word he so desperately needed to hear that day, “TRUST.” Buechner placed the license plate on a book shelf in his study, where it served to remind him of his need to trust in God. “It’s rusty around the edges and a little battered,” he wrote, but it’s also “as holy a relic as I have ever seen.”⁷

Sitting out there in his car beside the highway, Frederick Buechner heard his Master’s voice by way of a passing car’s license plate. There are times when you open the Bible, and you know with certainty that the verse you just read was God speaking directly to you. Or you see a moving Christian film like “The Son of God” (2013), “Heaven is for Real” (2014), or the “God is Not Dead” series, and the Lord speaks to you through a big-screen drama. He sure spoke to me when I saw “The Passion of the Christ” in 2004, reminding me powerfully that Jesus suffered indescribable agony in payment for my sin—which convicted me to ask forgiveness from someone I had offended.

May God give us the grace to be like that faithful little dog, Nipper, who, even after Mark Barraud left this earth, continued attentively to listen to his master’s voice that came from a phonograph cylinder. May we just as faithfully listen to our Master’s voice that comes to us in so many ways, even though Christ has left this earth. And may God give us the discernment to listen well, in all the ways He chooses to speak to us—and then, may He grant us the courage and strength to follow and obey what His Son Jesus tells us. *Amen.*



* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 2 March 2014, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Adapt. “His Master’s Voice,” 10 December 2022, [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/His_Master%27s_Voice) < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/His_Master%27s_Voice > 13 February 2023.

² Adapt. AKC Staff, “Once Upon a Dog: Nipper, the RCA Dog,” 1 January 2009, [American Kennel Club](https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/lifestyle/high-fidelity-nipper-the-rca-dog/#:~:text=Commonly%20identified%20as%20a%20fox,how%20it%20could%20help%20sales), <<https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/lifestyle/high-fidelity-nipper-the-rca-dog/#:~:text=Commonly%20identified%20as%20a%20fox,how%20it%20could%20help%20sales>> 13 February 2023.

³ Adapt. “Active Listening: Hear What People Are Really Saying.” [MindTools.com](http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm), 2014 <<http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm>>. 28 February 2014. Used with permission.

⁴ Adapt. “Active Listening,” 11 February 2023, [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active_listening) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active_listening > 13 February 2023.

⁵ Adapt. Daniel F. Perkins, “Active Listening: A Communication Tool,” December 1999, [University of Florida IFAS Extension](http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HE361) < <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HE361>> 13 February 2023.

⁶ Adapt. “John 10:27,” n. d. [Bible Hub](https://biblehub.com/john/10-27.htm) < <https://biblehub.com/john/10-27.htm> > 13 February 2023.

⁷ Adapt. Frederick Buechner, qtd. by King Duncan, “Collected Sermons,” 25 February 2014, [Sermons.com](http://sermons@clergy.net), , via <sermons@clergy.net> 28 February 2014. Used with permission.