

“If today you hear His voice, harden not your hearts.” This is one of those phrases in Scripture that I look to a lot, because it drives me crazy! Because growing up, and in seminary, what I wanted to hear most of all was the voice of God. I wanted to be sitting there in silence, saying “God, speak to me,” and then hear Him say, **“Hello!”** That’s all I wanted! I didn’t want anything mystical, I didn’t want anything amazing, I just wanted to hear, **“I’m real!”** That’s all I wanted! And so I was so frustrated growing up that I didn’t have this amazing experience of hearing God’s voice. And every time we have this psalm, “If today you hear God’s voice, harden not your hearts,” my struggle was that I’d harden my heart because I wasn’t hearing God’s voice. And so every time we had this psalm, I would get a little more gruff, and a little more gruff, and say, “God, you said to not harden my heart, but I’m not hearing it, so I’m hardening my heart more and more and more.” And then I realized, as I’ve spoken of before, that what I wanted to hear was a big booming voice, but that is not the voice of God.

My brothers and sisters, God speaks to us with a still, silent, voice. He speaks to us in the silence. Maybe not how we want to hear Him, where we want to hear Him, the way we think we should hear Him, but His voice has never *not* spoken. But God is always whispering to us. He’s always wanting us to hear Him, and for us to not harden our hearts toward Him, but instead, to heed His calling.

And so what we have in the second reading today, “Brothers and sisters, I should like you to be free of anxieties...” Talk about speaking to the center of my heart! As many of you know, I’m an anxious person. I stay up at night because I can’t sleep, because I’ve got thoughts racing through my head. I have all of these anxieties within me. But I realized this last week. Anxiety is not a good thing. (Go figure, right?) And it took, not only this reading as I was preparing for the homily this weekend. But as I was talking to the freshmen at McGuinness.

I always learn so much from the kids, it’s kinda crazy. We were talking this last week, about the book of Genesis. And so I go in, wide eyed, and expecting them to know everything I’m going to talk about. “How many of you have read the book of Genesis?” Blank stares. I think one hand went up, in the whole day. What are you guys learning about? You just finished talking about the book of Genesis. Tell me about the book of Genesis! “It’s about the beginning, Father.” Yes, it is about the beginning, it is the first book in Scripture. Tell me about

Genesis! “Well, I mean, you’ve got the creation stories...” OK, so you got to chapter two. Tell me about Genesis! “Well, you know, well there’s Noah, and this tower of Babel, and ...” Well, can you tell me about them? “No, we just know they happened.”

At this point I was getting frustrated. Do we understand the name of your class is “Salvation History?” Tell me about how salvation history has anything to do with the book of Genesis! Nothing. “God.” Yes, God has something to do with salvation history. What does He have to do with salvation history? “He does it.” Out of the mouths of babes. Oh, my gosh. So I’m sitting there in class trying to teach about salvation history and I realized that they have no idea what the book of Genesis has to do with salvation history.

My anxiety was welling up within me. Much like it must have been with Eve, when she was talking to the serpent, where he doesn’t go out and say, “Here, take this – eat this, it’s going to cause you to die.” No, he says, “Did God *really* tell you not to eat the fruit of *any* tree in the garden?” Our anxiety many times starts with that same thought process. “Is that *really* the life that God wants you to live? Are you *really* doing enough?” And what is that, but the seed of doubt? For most of us, at least for myself, doubt is what leads us to living anxiety in our lives.

And so when we went further into the book of Genesis, we went to one of my favorite chapters, Genesis chapter 15. Where we find the covenant between God and Abram. I’d say, “Guys, listen up. Salvation history here...” This is where it starts. This covenant, this promise between God and man, this is where it all starts. This is where He promises us that He’s going to offer Himself as a sacrifice for our sins. This is where it begins.

God had gone through this amazing experience with Abram, had promised him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore. Abram had gone and made this covenant, and what does he do right afterwards? He begins to doubt. Because immediately following the verses of the covenant between God and man, Sarai, (Abram’s wife Sarah, before her name was changed) comes to him and says, “Look, I’m not having these kids. I’m old.” Because if you look at the age of Abram and Sarai in this time, they’re both in their 90’s. How many of you in your 90’s want to have kids? How many of you

in your 90's want to be parents. If God came to you and said, "The line of succession will happen through you, but after you turn 90," how do you think you would answer?

But God had made this promise. Abram began to doubt. Sarai said it's not going to happen. So Sarai then gives her handmaid to Abram to lie with. God says, that's not the promise that I made with you. But already after this first true covenant, this first promise from God, we began to doubt. Just as Adam and Eve did in the garden. And that doubt leads us to living lives of anxiety.

God, why can't I hear your voice? Why won't you show me exactly what I need? Because many times we need to learn it for ourselves. We need to discover by actually DOING it. I can remember growing up, being the second oldest of 5, wanting to show my younger brothers and sisters how to do things. My parents would always tell me to let them do it themselves. "They have to learn."

It's the same way that God speaks to us. We have to many times learn by ourselves how we are called to live lives of love because if someone tells it to us, ok, I will have learned it theoretically. But until I've learned it practically, many times it's just in that thought bubble that nothing really happens with. We just go through the motions of this is how I'm supposed to live, and I know why I'm supposed to live this way, but I just don't, and I struggle with that, and I don't know why. Anxiety. Once we learn God's voice, once we learn where He's calling us to, who he's calling us to be, we begin to become a little less anxious.

It's interesting, having only been a priest for only 2 and a half years, I've gone through so many renovations of my heart and my mind in just two short years, because of this. I've learned that where God speaks to me is rarely where I look to Him to speak. Every week when we come to Mass, we call the readings from the Word of God.

But we hear them the same way that Charlie Brown hears his teacher, "Waa waah wah waah, God, wah waah wah." Many times that's what we hear when we hear these Scriptures. We don't hear, "I should like you to be free from anxiety." (Yeah, me too.) We don't look into what He's telling us. We don't investigate it.

One of the biggest complaints I get about Mass is that it's boring. It's only boring if you don't put anything into it. It's that old phrase, you only get what you give. If you give, "Well, I rolled out of bed and I made it to Mass, on time-ish," then you're probably going to get very little-ish out of going to Mass. You're going to get very little out of the Scripture, you're going to get very little out of community, you're going to get very little out of the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ, present in the Eucharist.

But if I look over the readings before I come, I say God, where are you speaking to me in your word? And then I do the novel thing of closing my mouth and opening my ears, I can begin to hear the voice of God. And it may not be a big booming voice, but that doesn't mean He doesn't speak to us. That doesn't mean that He's not looking to have this relationship with us that we keep talking about.

No, my brothers and sisters, through Scripture, God is seeking to lead us to salvation. He's seeking to show us how much He loves us. that He would send Himself in the form and image and the body of us, frail, mortal, corruptible. That He would degrade Himself from being God to being made man. Having to deal with colds, having to deal with anxiety, having to deal with stress and work, having to work, and having all of the human emotions that we go through every day. And then at the end of the day, in that angst, to turn to His Father in the Garden and say, if it's possible, let this happen another way. But not My will, Thy will be done. If it's possible, take this cup of sacrifice from me, but not My will, Thy will be done. I imagine there was amazing anxiety within Christ in the Garden. But anxiety not from sin, but anxiety due to the love He has for each and every one of us. So there can be some good anxiety, when we're looking out for the whole.

But many times our anxiety is, well, it's all about me. That's a favorite phrase that my older brother used to have, "The world revolves around me." "Yeah, well I don't. So does that mean I'm not part of the world?" But many times, that's how we live our lives. We live in such a small ring of what reality is. When we allow ourselves to break free of those chains that bind us, to break free of that selfish nature, we either become afraid, "What is this? I belong to a community, a whole? Well I don't know how to do that!" So we either investigate it, find out how to become part of that whole, or we go back to how we were

living, go back into our hole. Kind of like the groundhog will do on Friday! We either go out and see the magnificence that is the world, or we go out, see our shadow and go back into our little hole.

But God is calling us to have calm in our hearts. “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” That presupposes that some of us have hardened hearts towards God. That presupposes that some of us don’t agree with God’s decisions in our lives or in the lives of others. Does God do everything perfectly? To me, no. But in the grand scheme of things, yes. But when we are centrally focused on one issue, one concern, one topic, on just my life, on what’s sitting right in front of me, it’s hard for us to break out of that.

There’s that old term, ‘When God closes a window, He opens a door.’ But what happens when He closes that door, does He open an air shaft? Many times, yes. But we first have to open our own heart to hear Him, then to integrate into our lives what He’s calling us to do. Who He’s calling us to be. And at the end of the day, it’s the same answer for each and every one of us.

He’s calling you to be you. He’s calling you to be you and no one else. Many times our anxiety wells up and leads us to jealousy, “Well if only I had what they had. If only I had had this. If only, if only, if only...” We’re so focused on the other, we can’t see the blessing that we have. As I was telling the girls at Kairos last weekend, it’s interesting that when jealousy wells up within us, the same people we are jealous of are jealous of us! We say “What?!” How can anyone possibly be jealous of this? I’m a short fat and bald priest! But that’s just on the external. People don’t just look at the external, although many times we do. We judge books by their covers though we’ve been told not to from the earliest age.

When we get to the heart of the matter, when we get to the heart of the person we’re talking to, we see, “Wow, that person’s got it together! Why can’t I get it together?” And ironically the other person says, “Wow, that person’s got it together! Why can’t I get it together?” We begin to see that nobody is perfect. And that’s ok. We are called to strive for perfection my brothers and sisters, but that means we are going to struggle. That means that we are going to fail more than we succeed. And we have to be ok with failure, because that is an opportunity to succeed in the future. That old saying, ‘The only real mistake is the one you don’t learn from,’ is very true.

That's how we adapt, that's how we live. That's why it's better for me not to tell someone how to do something, but to allow them to make their own mistakes along the way, gently prodding and guiding as a shepherd would to his flock. Instead of leading them by the reins. My role isn't to say, "Here is how to have a perfect life." Because if I gave you that information, I'd be a fraud. Because that presupposes that I know what it means to have a perfect life and that I have a perfect life. I don't. I suffer from anxiety, just like most of us do. I struggle with it, just like most of us do.

But it's in that struggle where I can learn the voice of God. Where I can hear what St Paul says to the Corinthians, "I should like you to be free of anxiety." He's talking to me and he's talking to you just as he spoke to the Corinthians. And he's doing this not for his own benefit, not for our own benefit. Not to put restraints on us but as he says for the sake of propriety. In adherence to the Lord without distraction. For when we remove the distractions in our lives, we can truly hear the voice of God. We can see His will lined out before us. And then, thanks be to God, we can have the strength and the courage to go out and to do it.