

Finding God in The Noise *And* The Silence | Amanda Hodge

I know many of you are sitting there this morning marveling at how perfectly everything has gone!

And though we can honestly chuckle about that I stand by this truth: That these children and youth of our church are quite an impressive bunch!

But I'll let you in on a little secret. Planning Children & Youth Sunday is a lot like herding cats. Really it is more like herding cats, in the rain, during a full moon, when you have lost your voice and have forgotten one of your shoes.

I'll give you all a moment to envision Susie and I in that vivid analogy, just for fun.

But then, after all the work, we all get to be here together on this day and truly marvel at all that God is doing here. Not through perfection, but through noise, and mistakes, and laughter, and yes, even TikTok dances! Isn't it lovely to pause and rejoice in all the noise?

Both, what we all get to hear today, but also the noises we hear on other Sundays too. The kind of noise that makes you lose your place in the hymnal, the kind that echoes down the hallway during what was supposed to be a moment of silent prayer. The cooing and even cries of the babies sprinkled throughout the sanctuary. The busy bodies and rattling toys of the kids in our little carpeted kid area. It might not seem like they are paying attention, but they are. And the more important question, I think, is whether *we* are paying attention to *them*.

Parker Palmer tells a story in his book *Let Your Life Speak* about when his daughter and newborn granddaughter came to live with him. He writes that through watching this baby in her very first days, he could see something in his fifties that had completely eluded him as a young parent. This child was not raw material to be shaped into whatever the world wanted her to be. She arrived already fully *herself* — with her own form, her own soul, what Palmer calls her birthright knowledge of who she was. Our biblical faith calls it *imago dei*; the image of God.

Palmer says he missed that the first time around, when he was raising his own kids. He was so focused on shaping them — teaching them, correcting them, molding them into responsible people — that he often didn't see what was already there. But with his grandchild, he could simply stop, and pay attention. And when he did that, he realized

he didn't need to *make* her into anything. All he needed to do was *get to know who she already was*.

No matter your relationship with the children and youth in the service today, there is a lesson in that for all of us. These children running through our hallways, these youth sitting in this sanctuary — they are not projects. They are not our raw material. They arrived already bearing the image of God. They arrived complete and beloved. Our job is to teach them sure, but let us not get so caught up doing that, that we forget our job is also to *listen* to them, to *learn* from them, and to watch for who God already made them to be, and to help them hear that voice for themselves.

In our scripture today, we meet Samuel. A young boy, much like our middle and high schoolers. He is lying in the temple at night and when God calls his name, Samuel doesn't recognize the voice at first. He thinks it's Eli. He is confused and disoriented. Trying to be obedient, but to what or who he is not sure. And so, God reaches for Samel again. And then again.

It happens three times before Eli finally realizes what's happening and tells Samuel: the next time you hear that voice, say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

I want to point out two things about this story. First: God spoke to the child. Not to the old priest. But directly to the young kid. And second: it took Samuel a while to figure out whose voice it was. He had to learn to listen. And he needed someone older to help him understand what he was hearing.

That's the work of a church, isn't it? Helping each other learn to recognize God's voice in a host of places. But it does not just happen in one direction. It happens from the older generation to the younger *and* it happens from the younger generation *to* the older.

Again, from today's scripture, Psalm 100 doesn't say "Make a polite, well-timed sound unto the Lord." No, it says make a *joyful* noise. Come into God's presence with singing. The psalm doesn't ask us to be quiet first and then approach God. It tells us to show up loud, glad, and grateful — and to know that right there, in the middle of all that noise, we are God's people, and God is already with us.

Children remind us of this way of being. Of this *permission* given to each one of us to be who we are.

And yet — you also heard today how our middle schoolers began for us this morning. With a chime from the singing bowl. With silence. With stillness. They start each Wednesday night this way because they know something else: that sometimes we need to quiet everything down before we can hear what matters.

Here's what I think the scriptures are telling us: it's not noise *or* silence. It is not this way is right, and that way is wrong. It is about embracing *both*. It is about balance. Some mornings you need the joyful noise — the singing, the laughter, the sound of this community being fully alive. And some mornings you need the chime and the stillness. Some seasons of life are already so loud with new babies, full schedules, graduations, big transitions — and God is right there in it all.

And some seasons ask us to be still, to slow down, and to *stop talking* or keeping busy long enough to hear what God has been saying all along. The practice isn't choosing one over the other. The practice is learning to listen in both.

God is audible in the middle of all of our lives — in the noise and in the silence — when we are wise enough to listen.

Which brings us here. To listening. To this day, when the Children and Youth run the show. When they have dreamt of ways to share their faith and fun with all of us! *And* to this day where we also celebrate those graduating. A huge moment of transition where our graduates are both looking back and looking forward all at once.

Our three graduating seniors, Lily, Briana, and Emily are here with us today and we also celebrate Marcus who is not here today, but is graduating from graduate school.

All of these young people have grown up in this noise — our noise, this church's noise, this community's joyful, complicated, sometimes-chaotic noise. And they have been learning to listen. Not just to us, but for something deeper. For the voice that called Samuel in the night. For the God who says, “make a joyful noise!”

And I deeply pray that we have been listening too. To them, to their stories and delights, to what pains them and confuses them. To what they are here to teach us about God. And if we have not done so yet, let us begin today.

Our high school seniors are going to share with us about hearing God in a noisy world. Not where you are *supposed* to hear God. But where they *actually* find God showing up — in all of the everyday, loud, busy, overwhelming, and beautiful places of their world.

Let us listen.

By Lily R:

I'm sure a lot of you agree that this year especially, finding space away from the noise of the world has been really hard. For me, it's much easier to find that space in the summer. I spend time each August in the boundary waters, phone free and surrounded by softly rustling trees and a still lake. But in the hustle of the school year, I've never been quite sure how to formulate what that space looks like in my day to day. I fill my hours with everything: clubs, school, homework, work, sleep, repeat. Every year I keep going and going, and every year I crash right around April and early May.. So right around when I was first asked to talk about finding holy peace. Being in a state of complete exhaustion and anxiety at the time, I decided I needed to pay attention. So I started to listen. And the first thing I heard was my orchestra.

When I was six months old, my parents enrolled me in my first music class. Which, in a full circle moment, are now the types of classes my dad teaches. Now, I of course don't remember the first couple years of that class, but that first experience of music has still stuck with me. When my dad started teaching a couple years ago, even though I had not heard the curriculum's songs since I was less than 3 years old, I knew almost every song word for word.

Starting with that first class, I have been surrounded by music my whole life, especially once I started playing violin. I have played violin for 7 years now, and just finished my last concert with the Central Minnesota Youth Orchestra. It was that concert when I started to listen. Originally, I was focused on getting every note perfect. But the last piece we played stuck out to me, Barber's Adagio for Strings. It was the first time in a while where I really listened to what we were playing, and soon after, everything went silent. Through that music, all the homework I had yet to get done, the news I read that day, everything disappeared. And then came my favorite part.

The last note rang, and for what felt like forever we held the silence, letting the sound fade into nothing. That piece opened my eyes to realize that for me, the noise of the world disappears in music.

Within the last couple of weeks I've revisited the role music plays in my life and have found that it is foundational to my rest. Whether that be while performing in worship or orchestra, singing around a campfire, or blasting music in the car after a long day,

music helps me recenter and reconnect with the world around me. As I go on to college, I will go with my love of music and the connection I have learned from all of you, remembering that I can access holy silence when I just stop to listen.

By Briana S:

When I was asked to come up here and talk about the noise in the world, I had no idea what I was going to say. With graduation coming up, my senior prom, senior pictures, planning a grad party, getting together with friends, finals week, my job, committing to college, finding a roommate, and planning for the future, those demands alone provided enough noise, I didn't even know how to start writing.

But when I really made space and thought about it, I realized exactly what I was supposed to talk about. For months I have been constantly surrounded by questions and conversations about deciding who I should be, where I should go, and what I should do. It felt like there was never going to be an end to the noises, pressures, and distractions.

I kept thinking - why won't God help me and just give me all the answers I'm looking for. But that was the problem, I was waiting for God to guide me throughout the chaos, when instead, it was waiting for me all along.

In order to truly hear God's voice, even when so much is going on in your life, you have to pause, look for stillness, and listen. God's voice is always there, waiting for you to recognize it. And of course that is not an easy task. There are some days where fear is louder than faith and I question if I'm really hearing God or if I'm just telling myself what I want to hear. In these moments, everything feels uncertain. I overthink and second guess myself, looking for answers in all the wrong places. I want a clear answer, one without question, an easy decision.

But when I finally slow down, make space for God, and surround myself with the people in this church who ground and support me, when I let myself be still enough to reflect, that's when I start to see more clearly. I make space for God by going to youth group. By joining my peers, reflecting on my week in a safe space, and by learning more about God.

Recently, we have been learning the story of Exodus, where God speaks directly to Moses through a burning bush. Unlike Moses, I have never experienced God appearing before me in such a clear, physical way; it would be much easier if faith worked like that.

But even though I don't see God in that way, I still choose to believe that He is guiding me, even when I don't fully understand the plan yet, much like how Moses chose to trust and follow where God led him.

Because of stories like this, I am reminded that God doesn't always give us an answer we can understand. And over time, by choosing to trust that God is speaking to me, even when I can't fully see it or explain it, I've started to recognize God's voice with more clarity.

It is the voice that brings peace, not pressure. It's the one that doesn't change depending on my circumstances. The one that gives me courage to take the next step, even when I can't see the whole path. And I remember that faith isn't about having all the answers—it's about trusting the One who does. Listening to God does not make the noise go away. The world will always be loud. Life always comes with pressure and distractions. But this church has changed the way I look at my faith.

My faith does not involve a life without noise, but instead a life where I choose to hear God within it all.

By Emily S:

When I was given the question, "*With all the noise in the world, how can we still hear God speaking?*" I was honestly excited. I thought it would be this meaningful process where I'd sit in silence and eventually find some clear answer. But instead, I got frustrated. Not because there wasn't an answer, but because I couldn't get past all the noise in my own head. I thought I needed silence to hear God, and I just couldn't get there. So eventually, I gave up trying to be quiet. I walked away from it and just let myself be loud, embracing all the noise instead of fighting it. At the time, that didn't feel like progress at all. But then I realized something: I might have already experienced my answer. I kept thinking back to Wednesday nights, especially when I was with some of the younger kids from our church—toddlers like Finn, Ruby, and Charles. They were performing what I can only describe as "invasive surgeries" on me, climbing all over me and somehow seeming to disappear into midair even though I could still feel the extra weight on my back. They handed me magic xylophones, pulled me into imaginary adventures, and somehow convinced me to hold some very impressive yoga poses. And in the middle of all that chaos—on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings—people would pull me aside and say, "It brings me so much joy to see you with those

kids.” Those moments stuck with me. Because in all that noise—in the chaos, the laughter, and the yelling—I wasn’t distracted from God. I was actually the most myself.

And that’s when it clicked.

Maybe I’ve been looking for God in the wrong places.

I don’t hear God by escaping the noise. I hear God in it. I hear God in the joy, in the chaos, and in the moments where I’m fully and genuinely myself. I hear Him in the people around me—in the way they see me, in the way they encourage me, and in the way they show up for me. I hear God through the littlest voices, through the laughter and trust of children who remind me what it looks like to be fully present. I hear Him through the affirming words of church members who have spoken encouragement into my life, often without even realizing how much I needed it. Through this community, people have been like Jesus to me—offering kindness, patience, joy, and love in ways that have shaped who I am. And I’ve never been able to be that version of myself more than I have in this church community.

As I move into this next big chapter of my life, I’ve been thinking about what I want to take with me. And what I’ve learned here—because we are not told exactly what or how to believe—is this: be loud. Be yourself. And surround yourself with a community that helps you hear God, even in the noise. Sometimes, in trying to listen to every voice around us, we can lose ourselves. We get caught up in what the world expects, what it demands, and what we think faith is supposed to look like. But when we let go of what we thought it had to be, and instead give in to what God is calling us toward, we find something even better. We find faith—not always in silence, not always in certainty, but in the unexpected moments where God meets us exactly as we are.

For me, that’s been in the noise.

And maybe that’s where God has been speaking all along.