

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel for the Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, November 7, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Half-Truths, Pointless Noise, and Other Opinions

I wonder what you all thought about the recent flap over Juan Williams, the NPR news announcer who lost his job because he said that seeing people dressed like Muslims boarding a plane on which he is flying as a passenger makes him very nervous. To me it was fascinating to listen to the hubbub of half-truths, pointless noise, and other opinions that immediately filled the media. There was little or no exchange of communication—mostly a whole lot of heat without very much light; an increase in the sound level and a parallel *decrease* in actual discourse.

I'm reminded that, where we used to live in Memphis, the local NPR station was located on the radio dial right between two more powerful frequencies. One broadcast nonstop Pentecostal church services and the other carried round-the-clock swap-and-shop announcements about area auctions and local yard sales. What happened was that, not infrequently, a battle for the airways occurred. The signals would get intertwined and the speaker would sort of "migrate" between the three. The result was utter chaos. If you wanted to hear the real message—the Susan Stanbergs and Garrison Keillors—you had to be determined...and patient. It usually took considerable fiddling with the dial, turning the radio set around, or moving to a different electrical outlet before you could get things straightened out.

For me, it seems like the whole world is turning into something like that drifting radio station. The noise, the static, the "migrating of frequency signals" makes coherent thought next to impossible.

In the Gospel reading this morning (Luke 20:27-38), there's a story in which Jesus is trying to carry on a serious discussion. He has been describing a state of peace, unity, and harmony in which all people are valued and respected. In the middle of that there are other voices that break in. They pose hypothetical conundrums about the afterlife of people who had been married more than once and which spouse winds up with which husband when they all wind up strumming harps up there in the clouds. It's not a serious discussion they want; it's just noise to distract everybody else.

In Mark's Gospel there are numerous incidents described in which the competing noise that threatens to drown out the words of Jesus aren't seen as man-made. They are attributed to "demons," the voices of spiritual chaos and evil. Jesus is constantly depicted as shouting at the demons to "Quiet down!" Mark represents all the static, meaningless noise, distraction, and monkey-chatter as the primary way that demons get between us and the comforting word of God that frees us, gives us peace, and helps us to move forward into lives of meaning and purpose.

Let me suggest to you that there are modern demons—voices of chaos and deceit that are still very much alive and well in today's world. Let me show you what I mean. I'm going to take just three examples of how we experience such "airwave jamming."

Here are three topics that I think we would all agree on which we have a direct message from the Lord: Want, Walls, and War. On these three subjects, the Gospel message is unambiguous. God's Kingdom is one in which there is abundance for ALL—**no want**. In God's Kingdom there are no barriers of division, separation, or isolation—**no walls**. In God's Kingdom there is no fighting, killing, and destruction—**no war**. God's intentions for us and for this world at least in these three areas of life are crystal clear.

Now, this is where the demons come in. For the past several months, as this nation has ramped up to Election Day, I've heard lots of static, conflicting messages that can drown out the truth. Here are just a few memorable quotes I've heard:

Voices say: "I'm so tired of hearing about the homeless and the unemployed—those people are always looking for a handout." "This is the land of opportunity, unless you're just too lazy to work." "If you've lost your house to foreclosure, you probably deserve it because you were living beyond your means." **God says No Want.**

Voices say: "People really prefer to be with their own kind and color." "A Habitat House in this neighborhood will destroy property values for the rest of us." "I say arrest and deport all those people who don't belong in this country." **God says No Walls**

Voices say: "What are we supposed to do—all these Muslims and terrorists started the violence." "Maybe might does make right." "All those Wiki-Leak incidents describing civilian casualties just show you can't fry an egg without cracking the shell." **God says No War.**

See what's happening here? All those voices pouring out a message that distracts us from God's Word. Notice that what the voices are telling us is not out-and-out lies so much as half-truths, superficial ideas that provide us an excuse for refusing to do what, deep in our hearts, we know God expects of us.

There is another way, one that is more difficult and challenging, that's for sure. But it is a way that leads, ultimately to peace and fulfillment. The way of Jesus is the way that tunes out all the distractions, the demons, the half-truths of life by focusing on the clear word of God, the word of truth. It is a way of holding ourselves up to a higher standard, not giving in to the easy and convenient solution—continuing to live with the questions, searching for the loving and forgiving response.

The Bible tells us plainly and directly that, "You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free." That truth is on the air everywhere twenty-four hours a day. Listen, think, pray, and reflect. You will find God's word deep down and insistent within your very being. You can hear it loud and clear. Refuse to listen to the simplistic and deceptive background chatter. It is possible to shut out the competing static and interference. When you've done that; what you will have left when all that is taken away—THAT is the voice of God. That is the same voice as the disciples heard all those years ago as Jesus emerged from the water of his own Baptism: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."