

Listen to Dissonance

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **Marrying Jason; seemed to be marrying into perfect Christian family.** Our church had given his family the “volunteer of the year award.” Parents ran prayer ministry team. Trained lots of people in ministry. Dad preached on occasion. Mom mentored lots of women, organized events. Friends jealous of me marrying into the Martens. Family dinners every Monday night. Going to parents whenever we had issue in first 5 years of marriage. Elliott born, grateful to have such amazing grandparents close by.
- B. **Story of being called in and told Jason’s parents were separating.** Jason’s father had a drinking problem. Mother felt unsafe. Couldn’t pretend anymore. Our whole framework for understanding each of them, their marriage, their faith, how church worked, all began to crumble. Moment of profound dissonance.
- C. Dissonance in music - dictionary definition: “**a simultaneous combination of tones conventionally accepted as being in a state of unrest and needing completion; an unresolved, discordant chord or interval**”
- D. Complicated experience of dissonance when it comes to life and faith. **What happens when life circumstances ring discordantly with how things are supposed to be?** We’re finishing a series on **Listening for the voice of God**; we’ve covered a range of things. Listening by **paying attention to the greater story the Bible tells, or what we respond to in Scripture.** Listening by paying attention to our **inner dialogue with God.** Listening by attuning to the **pictures and words that come into our mind when we pray**, for ourselves or for others. Even **listening with our body**, talked about fasting as a means to respond to our need to hear God, that may sometimes yield interesting results.
- E. **What do we do with the dissonance when we try to listen?** Does it get in the way of our hearing God or our capacity to receive the things we’re hearing from Him? Does dissonance need to be rejected/dismissed/resolved? **Or might the dissonant notes actually also be part of God speaking?**

II. **Peter Rollins, writer and Christian thinker with an academic background in philosophy** - PhD in post-structural theory. Usage of **Jacque Lacan’s** psychoanalytical framework -20th century French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist. Three orders of perception that intersect.

- A. **The imaginary** - your fantasy, the princess, the hero (knight, Jason Bourne, James Bond), the picture of what you aspire to be. Your idealized version of yourself; the person you cultivate and present on Facebook. People who live too much in the imaginary, often try to extinguish the truth tellers. Need to protect the image.
- B. **The symbolic** - the total structure that upholds the imaginary; the language employed to name the image. The system that defines there are knights and there are dragons; what’s good and bad; right and wrong; norms and values
- C. **The real** - that which disrupts the imaginary and the symbolic. It’s not what you imagine and speak about necessarily, it’s what is.
 - 1. The annoying person on Facebook who confronts your idealized version of yourself
 - 2. Your spouse who hold up a mirror and says, actually you’re not so strong, you’re not so kind
 - 3. The moment the facade crumbles - you yell at your kid, the drinking problem you’ve been denying harms someone you care about, your marriage falls apart,
 - 4. **Into the Woods, the musical** - act 1 the realm of the imaginary and symbolic. Act 2, the Real breaking through. Prince charming cheats on Cinderella. The giant that is killed by Jack has a wife, who’s pretty upset. The Baker’s wife, after finally getting her longed for

child is tragically and meaningless-ly killed by a falling tree, leaving the baby motherless. Life doesn't always work like it's supposed to in the movies, or the fantasy books. Happily ever after isn't real.

D. For Rollins: what if this was helpful in how we think about God

1. **God: the imaginary** - the Superbeing....large projection of our idealized self. God the warrior, God the perfect Father; can ultimately be ourselves with a megaphone.
2. **God: the symbolic** - the one who defends and justifies our systems of inclusion and exclusion, who we identify as right and wrong; Who is in and who is out.
3. **God: the real** - the one who pierces the imaginary and the symbolic.

III. **Saul's conversion: Acts 9: 1-21 (NLT)**

A. **setup:** This story comes from the book of Acts and tells us about an important even in life of a Pharisee named Saul. The time was during the early months of the church after Jesus has left his disciples to carry on his work, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Saul was a fear-inspiring leader of the Jewish Pharisees whose personal mission was to hunt down followers of Jesus, arrest them, accuse them, and if possible, execute them. Saul was a man who was willing to resort to violence when necessary to back up his religious and political beliefs. The first place we are introduced to Saul is at the stoning of Stephen, where Saul oversees and approves of the first killing of a Christian. From there, he seeks to bring more followers of Jesus to violent ends.

In Acts 26:10-11 Saul himself shares, *"On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities."*

Saul was the Jew to be feared among the early followers of Jesus. When our story takes place, he was traveling all the way to Damascus, a 2 to 3 days journey from Jerusalem, to capture Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment, likely execution. You can imagine that the young church in Damascus was terrified as they received word from their fellow church in Jerusalem that Saul was coming with documents that would indict them. And with this scenario in mind, we pick up the story in Acts 9.

B. **Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. 2 He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.**

3 As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"

5 "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked.

And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! 6 Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

7 The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but

saw no one! 8 Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. 9 He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink.

10 Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord!” he replied.

11 The Lord said, “Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. 12 I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again.”

13 “But Lord,” exclaimed Ananias, “I’ve heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! 14 And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name.”

15 But the Lord said, “Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. 16 And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.”

17 So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18 Instantly something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. 19 Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength.

Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. 20 And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is indeed the Son of God!”

21 All who heard him were amazed. “Isn’t this the same man who caused such devastation among Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem?” they asked. “And didn’t he come here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests?”

- C. Paul is confronted by the voice he has been suppressing. He is forced to hear the voice of the “other”.**
- 1. Jesus is more than a possible Messiah for Saul. Saul is not agnostic. At the time this encounter happens, he is the enemy to be expunged. He is the dragon that Saul the knight was sent to kill. And now the dragon is disarming the knight.**
 - 2. Jesus breaks through Saul’s symbolic framework. He breaks through his image of himself as the religious Savior who is saving the Jews by getting rid of these Jesus people. Instead Jesus shows him he’s not a hero he’s a tyrant.**
- D. The rupturing of Saul’s imaginary and symbolic frameworks is paralyzing and disabling.**
- 1. Saul was leading the way. Now he must be led. Saul was independent. Now he is utterly dependent. Saul thought he saw clearly, but now he is physically blinded; pointing to his total blindness to his symbolic framework.**
- E. The encounter with the real Jesus is the entrance to a new way of seeing.**

1. Jesus takes that which is good about Saul's framework and sense of self and redirects it.
2. The real helps him actually become the best version of himself.
3. This is something Jesus does over and over again. We see there in this story. Saul isn't the only one who has his symbolic framework pierced. Look at Ananias. And the Jesus followers in Damascus. When Jesus actually speaks or acts it doesn't confirm our biases if it's really Jesus. It confounds our logic. Confounds our systems of thinking. Confounds the way things are supposed to work. Ultimate proof this is so: nothing is more confounding than Christ crucified and resurrected.

IV. The story of Jason and the pier.

A. My fear after Jason's parents separated that his faith was demolished.

1. What did this mean for our marriage? I believed in not being unequally yoked. I'd married a man who shared a common faith with me. We prayed together regularly. We were super involved in church. We gave a significant percentage of our income away. And now he might not even believe in Jesus. If that was the case, what would marriage look like?
 2. What about our kids?
 3. What about the church? My dreams of church planting. Words I had heard from God, "someday you guys are going to start a church." Were those real? Picture of me as pregnant. Started to fear that my baby was still-born.
- B. In a prayer meeting with friends, picture given to me from a friend.
1. Jason on a pier in the middle of a lake. Pier collapsed. Jason cut off. An island in the middle of the lake. **"Don't get in the boat and try to rescue him. I have to rebuild the pier."**
- C. Meant years of waiting, years of uncertainty. Years of slow progress. Years of letting go of what the new pier would look like. Different pier than before. The one Jesus wanted for Jason.
- D. Jason's parent's separation and divorce was the beginning of a painful piercing of our worldview, for both of us. But though at times it felt like God was nowhere, looking back I see that this was **one of the holiest seasons of our lives**. This was a sacred process God brought us through of unlearning and relearning. Like Saul, we were paralyzed, we were disabled. But over time, we were also given a new way of seeing. A way having faith not in spite of questions but in the midst of them.
- E. Anthony Tommasini, classical music critic for The New York Times. Dissonance was used differently in jazz than it had been in other kinds of music. In jazz, all the chords have dissonance. The dissonant notes don't just provide tension that need to be resolved; they add color and dimension.
- F. This was some of the experience we had with our new way of seeing the journey of faith. Not something that needs to be resolved. Something that brings more complexity, dimension, and interest, and reveals more of the spectrum of beauty, more color, than without it.
- G. As long as we are too immersed in the imaginary and symbolic realms, we are blind to some of the dimensions we can't see. As long as confirmation bias shields us, we don't know what we're missing. We need the real, we need God, to help pierce our frameworks so we can see more clearly, more fully, and more powerfully appreciate the world God has made.

V. How do we listen for God in the dissonance?

A. Listen to the voices or life moments that challenge us.

1. Our Facebook feeds are often echo chambers. If we're not careful, we can be silo-ed from all other points of view, reinforcing the idea that ours is right.
2. Peter Rollins, "Evangelism Project"
 - a) listening to others (Synagogue, mosque, etc.) - Muslims, for example, about their experience of Christians. Help the Christians be evangelized to be better Christians. Reveal the blind spots.

B. Pay attention to the defensive response.

- a) Not every voice we disagree with is God. If someone is just talking smack for whatever reason and just says nonsense; you don't have to believe them. But attend to those words that trigger fear, guilt, shame in us should be noticed. Our response may point to the image or symbolic framework we're trying to protect, rather than the truth of what we really are.

C. Invite God's Spirit to lead you through and shape you in the dissonance.

1. Paul talks about "dying to self". Something he experienced first-hand. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live..."
2. Laying down the "sin of certainty" - Peter Enns.
*"Here is the temptation: we can forget that we are human and delude ourselves into thinking that we can transcend our tiny place in the human drama and see from on high, as God sees. It turns out that is not really one of our options. Walking the path of faith means trusting God enough to let our uh-oh moments expose how we create God to fit in our thinking. But that is hard work. We like our ideas about God. We need them. And that is really the deeper problem here...
When we grab hold of "correct" thinking for dear life, when we refuse to let go because we think that doing so means letting go of God, when we dig in our heels and stay firmly planted even when we sense that we need to let go and move on, at that point we are trusting our thoughts rather than God. We have turned away from God's invitation to trust in order to cling to an idol. The need for certainty is sin because it works off of fear and limits God to our mental images. And God does not like being boxed in. By definition, God can't be. I believe we are prone to forget that. God is good to remind us— by any means necessary, if we are willing to listen. God understands our human predicament and is for us."*
3. Ends advocates Seeking to follow God anyway, through the questions, amongst the doubts.
4. What if being "people who followed Jesus" meant people who submitted their lives in humility to the uh-oh moments, the moments of Real? Living into mystery and facing the limitation of human experience. Finding God in the moments where our logic breaks down? Not building up walls or systems to protect our fragile identities, not numbing the pain with alcohol/substances, spending, sex, but leaning into the sometimes painful reality that we don't have all the answers? That our imaginary selves aren't our true selves and our symbolic orders don't reveal reality? That our structures for understanding the the universe, understanding ourselves, and yes, understanding God are imperfect? What if being a community of Jesus followers, the body of Christ, meant being a people who shared that experience of having our frameworks occasionally pierced and re formed? What if we were a community that submitted to that and tried to participate it in ourselves and, with humility, with one another?
5. **Prayer of the Trappist Monk Thomas Merton,**
"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."