

# Visions and Voices!

Isaiah 42:1-9    Matthew 3:13-17

Over the holiday season, I had an intriguing, thrilling experience of listening to a podcast from the Canadian Broadcasting Company of a story entitled “The Shepherd”. The word pod means “Playable on Demand”, so it’s like a radio show, only instead of waiting for the show to be broadcast over radio at a certain time, you can play it on your ipod or your computer anytime, that is, “on demand”.

In any case, “The Shepherd” is a story written by British author, Frederick Forsyth. And a broadcast, on Christmas Eve, of CBC radio legend Alan Maitland reading “The Shepherd”, is a beloved Canadian tradition. It’s the story of a British Royal Air Force pilot trying to get home to England from Germany in a Vampire fighter plane in the early 1950’s on Christmas Eve.

Listening to the ½ hour broadcast is an awesome experience! You are literally drawn into the plane’s cockpit, and you fly along with the pilot over the North Sea as first his compass fails, then his instrument panel conks out, then all the plane’s electrical power fails—and he is about to crash through the foggy darkness into the sea and a certain death in the freezing waters. Suddenly, another plane, a World War II vintage Mosquito bomber comes up alongside of him—and slowly but surely guides him to a remote landing field just beyond the English coastline. There he manages to make a safe landing just as his fuel runs out. This particular landing field is maintained by a solitary older man who is surprised at the pilot’s extraordinary fortune in finding the obscure landing strip, unused since World War II. The pilot begins to recount his rescue by “the shepherd” Mosquito bomber, including the huge initials on the bomber indicating the bomber pilot’s initials **JK**. “Oh, those are the initials of a famous World War II pilot.” says the overseer. “I knew him well.” “Well, I’d like to meet him.” says the pilot. “Oh yes, he was the finest.” repeats the overseer, “none other like him...but he was lost over the North Sea in 1944 and never came back. He’s been dead over a decade now, God bless his soul.”

There, the dramatic spoken word presentation ends abruptly, with the reader left to wonder about the identity, real or imagined or envisioned, of “The Shepherd” who brought the pilot home safely on Christmas Eve.

In like fashion, we are asked today to consider a vision—and a voice—from the unseen communicated across the ages by the gospel author named Matthew: *“And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”*

**There are voices and there are visions! And we better listen to them and look for them if we want to make our way through this life and this world!**

In the days when World War I was breaking out, a British explorer named Shackleton, with a crew of 28 men, left for Antarctica in an attempt to become the first to cross the 1,500 mile wide continent that lies at the bottom of the Earth.

But the winter was worse than ever that year, and 150 miles from the landing location, their ship became trapped in the ice. Without radio or any other means of communication, the crew spent 10 months in the sub zero temperatures trying to free their ship, known as “The Endurance”.

Instead the ice continued to pile up, crushed the ship to pieces, and then when summer did come, the men were left floating on three wooden lifeboats in the icy waters.

Making for an island called Elephant Island, they were in perpetual danger of getting hopelessly off course, or worse, being crushed by the gigantic ice floes. They were starving from lack of food and intermittently driven insane by the deadly combination of monotony, extreme cold and equally extreme mental pressures.

All still alive when they reached the island, they were nonetheless still in the proverbial “Middle of Nowhere”. There was no choice but to take three boats and, from them, construct a single boat. Then, amidst the sea squalls, sharks and whales, five of them, led by Shackleton, made for South Georgia Island, 800 miles away, where maps showed a whaling station—while the rest lived in a make shift shelter, heating themselves with seal blubber in little stoves.

Injuries and frostbite incapacitated two of the five explorers before they reached the whaling island, and then when they got there, they found that the whaling station was far away on the other side of blizzard swept mountains. The two were left on the shore while the last three, led by Shackleton himself, began the dangerous walk and climb over the island mountain range.

It was now a year and a half since they had become stuck in the ice.

Often, when they would reach the island mountain peaks, the downhill sides were so steep they had no choice but to sit down and slide down them, their lives at risk every moment. Reaching the bottom, they had to get up and trudge across

icy valleys where, every few feet, they were in imminent danger of falling to their deaths into deep crevices in the ice.

Finally the three reached the whaling station. Much later, after they had returned to the other side of the mountain and rescued their 2 companions, and then had gone on back to Elephant Island and rescued all the others---every single one of them came back alive—Shackleton told the survivors that during the final trek across the mountains and ice valleys, he was certain that there were not just three of them fighting the ice, the snow and the wind—but four.

“Three of us started out.” he exclaimed. “But then a 4<sup>th</sup> came up along beside us and walked with us the entire way.”

But who was that 4<sup>th</sup> person? In reality, none ever appeared at the whaling station!

Thus, what has been called the greatest open boat expedition and survival story in history draws me back to this account of a vision and a voice in Matthew’s gospel: “*And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; & lo, a voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”*”

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After experiencing another Live Staged Reading of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* this year, I wanted to hear some other spoken word recordings of the story, and Nancy Gay was kind enough to bring me two well known recordings from the library where she works. They are good! One is done by the British actor Paul Scofield. Still, they do not measure up to the four voices we had here in mid-December. Nor do they create the vision in my imagination of the 19<sup>th</sup> century London Christmas season scene as Coppage, Murphy, Graham and McCrary do.

***I hear Voices! I see Visions!***

In the days when Rome ruled the world and its emperor schemed at reaching out and grasping Israel as an eastern outpost for Rome’s Imperial Army, a deeply spiritual individual named John the Baptist stood in the way. John was gathering followers in the wilderness by the Jordan River, when Jesus came to him, asking to be baptized.

It is said that John was reluctant to perform the ritual at first. **“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand.”** he said of Jesus. But John finally agreed, and then, when Jesus was baptized in the river, he saw the heavens open and a dove descended on him, and he heard a voice from heaven telling him: “My beloved Son! With You I am well pleased.”

Here we have an account of Jesus’ own mystical, 5<sup>th</sup> dimensional vision—and his own experience of 5<sup>th</sup> dimensional listening—to a voice coming from a 5<sup>th</sup> dimensional realm—that is HEAVEN!

**Visions and Voices! We need more of them in our world today!  
Then maybe we could really become alert to the lively activity and loving presence of God!**

While planning the Cinema and Soul Film Series a few years ago, I learned more about the French saint Joan of Arc. And one Good Friday, we showed the film of her trial called *The Passion of Joan*. The film is based on the actual transcripts of her trial, and it makes clear that she was persecuted, in part, because she insisted that she heard a Divine Voice. In fact, she told her cruel inquisitors: “There is not a day when I do not hear this Voice...light comes at the same time as the Voice, and I have much need of this Voice.”

So! A Vision—of a light! And a Voice—from the unseen! Which no one else apparently sees or hears!

In the Bible, isn’t that a familiar way of speaking of the presence and the power of God?

And aren’t men and women’s decisive hours always populated by spiritual voices and visions which, if we are alert to them and have made it our habit—through worship, study and prayer—to practice the presence of the Divine in our lives, will make all the difference in our lives?

Moments of decision! Moments of joy, faith and love! Moments even of tragedy, awareness and awe!

Hours when God and Christ became completely real to you!

Hours when you realized you really loved someone!

Hours when you raised your sails and launched your boat in a certain direction from which there was to be no turning back!

Hours when you confessed your sins and found yourself, surprisingly perhaps, saved!

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## CONCLUSION

**Tonight, we begin a brand new Cinema and Soul series. I was describing** it to T. Max Graham the night of *A Christmas Carol*. I told him it was our 9<sup>th</sup> annual series and that this was going to be a good one. "Finally!" he responded with a hearty laugh.

Well, tonight's film is called *Angel At My Table*. It's based on the three part autobiography of famed New Zealand author Janet Frame, who, in early adulthood, was misdiagnosed as schizophrenic, hospitalized for 8 years, given 200 electroshock treatments and was on the schedule for a frontal lobe lobotomy when one of the doctors realized she was a terrific writer and should be released from the hospital immediately.

To prepare to show the film tonight, I was reading some reviews of the film and Frame's autobiography. She was always painfully shy, and as a result, very much alone in the world. Her writing was her refuge—the world of imagination, to which she retreated when her anxiety and grief over being so lonely threatened to overwhelm her. As she grew older, one of the critics said, her prose became more and more insightful, because, the critic observed, "She had managed finally to look at life through an open window deep within.

***Looking at life through an open window deep within!***

I believe that it is through an open window like that—deep within—that Jesus was able to see the dove descending from the cloud and hear the divine voice!

God grant that you might be able to see life through an open window like that.

God grant that through that same open window, the voice of God might become vivid to you!

God grant us all hours and days when the voice and vision of The One Whose Whose Love is Everywhere becomes commanding and real! Amen.