

"An Audible Faith"
John 9:35-41; 10:1-10
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York Center Church of the Brethren
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It is becoming harder and harder to discern what is reality and what is computer-generated. Artificial Intelligence is all over the news these days. The definition of A.I. is: [intelligence](#)—perceiving, synthesizing, and inferring information—demonstrated by [machines](#), as opposed to [intelligence displayed by non-human animals](#) or [by humans](#). Examples include speech recognition, computer vision, and translation between languages. Some people celebrate this advance in technology, while others sound the alarm about the possible dangers that lie ahead.

A.I. generated images are raising questions of safety, privacy, ethics, and copyrights. I recently saw a posting online where a computer had generated images of what the fictional characters of the tv show, "The Office," looked like as children. It was really funny and adorable.

If you want to fall into a rabbit hole of image searches, just google "A.I Jesus." (but not now!)

Many of us are aware of the use of photoshop to edit or enhance a photograph, but this process is much more sophisticated. For one program all you need are seven photos of the person to synthesize an A.I. generated version of them. These photos are easily found on social media and can be copied without our permission. Cybersecurity concerns associated with these visual portraits include the creation of fake social media profiles and charity scams. After the earthquake in Turkey and Syria in February, one scammer produced realistic, A.I. generated photos of the disaster to pose as a charity. They took a lot of money from unsuspecting people. Other concerns include the spread of disinformation. In March of 2022 a fake video circulated on the internet claiming to show Ukrainian President Zelensky calling on his people to surrender to Russian soldiers. Do you see how dangerous that could be?

Anyone can take your photos from social media and create photos that claim to show you engaged in illegal or embarrassing activities. This could cause great difficulty in your family and your job, not to mention with law enforcement.

It isn't just your image that can be computer generated- so can your voice. A.I. voices are synthetic sounds that mimic human speech through a process called deep learning, where artificial intelligence is used to convert text into speech that can sound just like you. You probably already utilize this kind of technology if you ask questions to Siri on your phone,

call out orders to your Alexa gadget at home, or rely on a GPS navigation system while driving.

Like visual A.I. generated images, your voice can also be stolen to be used for nefarious purposes such as scamming people you know. Concerns also include voice A.I. being used for spreading hate speech, luring children by child predators and recruiting for terrorist groups.

Celebrities and politicians are likely victims of this kind of technology because their images and voices are everywhere but ordinary people like you and me can also be victimized. It is a scary prospect. So, how do we know what is real anymore? How do we know what and whom we can trust?

Apparently, we are not the first generation of humans to ask these questions. A good bit of scripture is dedicated to stories of Jesus introducing and identifying himself to people—sometimes over and over and over again. We also read of people who knew who he was, sometimes immediately after meeting him. We can't be surprised that the people of his day didn't recognize him, though. He looked and acted nothing like they were expecting the long-awaited Messiah to look and act.

In this text from John, we find the religious leaders once again mired in a conflict with Jesus. Here is what happened, starting in chapter nine. Jesus was walking along the street when he saw a man begging who was born blind. The disciples, voicing questionable theology, asked, "Rabbi, whose sin caused him to be born blind? His parents or his own?" Jesus, of course, disagreed with their theology of sin and proceeded to heal the man and then go on his way. The man's relatives and friends were, of course, astonished when they realized he could see. Some argued that it couldn't possibly be the same guy. When they asked how it happened, he told them about Jesus.

People were so distressed about this that they took him to the Pharisees, a group of religious leaders, because the man wasn't just healed, he was healed on the sabbath when you weren't supposed to do any work of any kind. The Pharisees deduced right away that this healer could not be from God because he was healing on the sabbath. Some of the people disagreed. So, they turned to the healed man himself and asked what he thought. He said Jesus is a prophet. They didn't like that answer so they called his parents in to testify about whether their son was really born without sight. The parents said he was their son, and they knew for sure he was born blind, and they had no idea how he could now see. "He's a big boy," they said, "ask him yourself."

So, they called the former beggar back a second time and interrogated him some more, hoping he would give them the correct answers. But of course, he didn't. Finally, he said,

"You keep asking me the same thing and I keep telling you what happened. Why do you want to hear it again? Do **you** want to become his disciples?"

That was the last straw! The Pharisees kicked the man out onto the street. Jesus heard what happened and found him. Jesus asked, "Do you believe in the Messiah of God?" The man replied, "Point him out to me and I will believe in him." Jesus said, "You are looking at him. Don't you recognize my voice?" And, in that moment, the healed man knew who Jesus was and said, "I believe," and he worshiped Jesus.

The healed man joins two others in the Gospel of John who found new life after they heard the voice of Jesus. Lazarus was dead in the tomb when Jesus stood outside and called him by name and demanded he rise. And he did.

Mary stood weeping in the garden in the dim light of dawn. She didn't recognize the man in front of her until he spoke her name. "Mary!" She knew him instantly!

But how do you know it is really the voice of Jesus you are hearing? How can you be sure the Risen Christ is the One speaking **your** name?

John gives us some helpful advice in chapter 10. Using a cast of characters that includes shepherds, sheep, thieves, bandits, gatekeepers, strangers, and even a gate, he tells us how and why we can recognize the voice of Jesus. The key is relationship. According to John, the sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd because they hear it all the time. They associate that voice with gentle care, food, water, and safety. Experience with the shepherd has proven to them that **this** voice is trustworthy.

If sheep are in the care of a lazy, inattentive, uninterested shepherd who leads them into dangerous situations, those who survive will learn quickly this person is not to be trusted or followed. This story makes even more sense when we realize that Palestinian shepherds of that time kept their sheep overnight in communal pens. Several flocks would be kept together for protection and probably so the shepherds could get some sleep. In the morning the shepherds would easily separate the flocks just by calling out the names of their sheep who would follow the familiar voice. And that is another thing- shepherds knew the names of each of their sheep because they were probably the ones who had named them in the first place.

If a stranger or a thief got into the pen, the sheep would not recognize the voice or the person and would not follow them. Plus, the gatekeeper wouldn't let a bad guy in in the first place.

Are we that different from sheep? With the cacophony of voices clamoring for our attention, our allegiance, our money, our loyalty, do we know which voice is to be trusted and followed? David Lose gives us some good advice for discerning who is for us and who is not. He wrote, *"No where else does Jesus express the intent of his mission and ministry more clearly than in the verse at the end of this passage: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." In contrast to all that would rob us of life- thieves and bandits- Jesus comes to give, not just life, but life in abundance. Not just survival, but flourishing; not just getting by, but thriving; not just existence but joy. Jesus offers more life than most of us can imagine is possible."*

David Lose lifts up three things that stand out in this passage. First, there is little talk of sin. Jesus doesn't say, "I came because there are a bunch of sinners in need of forgiveness." Rather, he came to offer us abundant life- big difference.

*"At the heart of the Gospel is the resurrection promise of life and possibility and power and potential. We are not only saved **from** something but also **for** something, for life in all its abundance here and now."*

Second, we can't understand the story of the sheep and the shepherd without first knowing the story of the healed man. For that man abundant life was sight and the freedom and independence it brought to him. So, it seems as though abundant life is contextual. It looks different in different places to different people, but it is always in response to whatever seeks to rob the children of God of their inheritance of life, purpose, and joy.

Third, if these things are true, if salvation is about more than forgiveness of sin, and if abundant life is contextual, defined by the needs of each person, then we are called to not simply **listen** to Jesus' promise of salvation and abundant life, but to actually **live** it.

If we consider ourselves Christians, disciples of the Risen Christ, that means, of course, that we must first pay attention to what is robbing the children of God near to us of life and then stand with them against those forces so that they might have, not just life, but life in abundance.

We can see from this text that abundant life is not simply a promise about some distant eternal future in heaven but is a concrete invitation to discover life right now by extending it to those around us. We learn that salvation isn't only the forgiveness of sin but also being commissioned by Jesus to help others experience abundant life where they live. We learn that the church isn't the place where we go only to give thanks for the abundant life we have received, it is the place that sends us out to experience and share it as we commit ourselves to the wellbeing of all God's children and indeed, the world God loves so much.

Maybe salvation and abundant life, like happiness, aren't goals for which we strive but rather byproducts of following Jesus, the one who opened the eyes of the blind, fed the hungry, comforted the distraught, and everywhere and always witnessed to the universal and unending love of God.

In a few months we are going to begin a process of identifying who we are and why we are here as a congregation. Throughout our history here in this place we have birthed and grown various ministries and programs, some continue to this day and others filled their purpose and then ended. A healthy congregation takes time every five or ten years to look closely at where they are and where they feel God is calling them to go.

These past few years have thrown us off our stride- first the pandemic lockdown and then my terrible horrible no good very bad injury last year. We have some rebuilding to do, spiritually and physically. A lot has changed in our world, in the church universal, and in our own lives.

We need to take the time to intentionally pray, think, and discuss who we are in this moment in time and how we can live out Christ's call to abundant life. I think this will be an exciting, joyful process as we talk honestly about our congregation and our own participation in it. We have been greatly blessed here in this place.

This congregation embodies the key to knowing the difference between artificial intelligence and God intelligence. A life of faith is based on relationship- with the Risen Christ and with one another. When we hear our name called, if we hear love in that voice, then we know for sure it is the voice of Jesus.

My hope for us as individuals and as a congregation is that we claim this promise: Jesus comes to give, not just life, but life in abundance. Not just survival, but flourishing; not just getting by, but thriving; not just existence but joy.

Jesus offers more life than most of us can imagine --- and it is a gift for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.