Since many of our normal social activities have vanished from our calendar, Kathy and I have been watching more than our usual share of movies in recent weeks. We’ve especially enjoyed classic comedies: “A Fish Called Wanda”, “Four Weddings and a Funeral” and my favorite “Little Miss Sunshine”. During these difficult times it seems more important than ever to find a way to have a good laugh.

A few weeks ago, I got adventurous and pulled a movie off my shelf that has been sitting there for at least 10 years. The DVD was left there by one of my kids. It was ‘Rope’, a highly acclaimed classic from the middle years of Alfred Hitchcock. Neither Kathy nor I had seen it before. After ten minutes, we had to turn the movie off. There was just too much tension and both of us felt physically ill.

I was mildly surprised at my response, because I’m a great fan of Alfred Hitchcock. I have at least 20 Alfred Hitchcock films in my DVD collection. After I moved beyond my initial encounter with Psycho at the age of 18, I discovered that Hitchcock was a master cinematographer. I have a low tolerance for violent images, and I was surprised to discover most of Hitchcock’s movies have few depictions of graphic violence.

I especially love the films Hitchcock created in the years before and after WWII. My favorite movie of all time is “The Lady Vanishes”. This shouldn’t come as a surprise to you because “The Lady Vanishes” is Hitchcock’s film about a kindly, elderly lady who also happens to be a music teacher and a few other things. I won’t reveal any more details because the pieces of the plot of “The Lady Vanishes” fit together like a puzzle. The delight comes from putting together the pieces of the puzzle. Hitchcock was a master of leaving little clues of the story scattered hither and thither throughout his films in a most intentional and effective way. No matter, two weeks ago it just seemed to be the wrong time to watch the highly acclaimed and suspenseful 1948 classic, ‘Rope’.

Especially during this time, we have to pay attention to the stories we are consuming and the voices we are hearing. This is a time when many of our normal activities have been cancelled or changed. This is a time when the world, our community, and our connections with one another are changing quickly and dramatically. Most of us are coming face to face with more uncertainty than ever before.

We need to pay attention to which voices we are hearing. We need to listen to the right voices, to read the right stories, for ourselves and for our families. Some of this is a matter of personal taste. For instance, the host of the PBS NewsHour, Judy Woodruff, is a person I trust. Judy helps me gain a positive perspective on the world and the work of people all around me. You probably have your own selection of people and voices that are especially helpful for you. But some of this goes beyond personal preference.

You and I were created by God, in the image of God. We need to be listening for the voice of the one who makes us. We need to listen for God’s voice in our lives. We need to be careful about listening to those who are speaking against God’s kingdom. This is one of the main ideas of our passage from the Gospel of John.

Jesus said, “The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

I have never been a shepherd the way people lived as shepherds in Jesus’ time. However, my wife told me of her experience with shepherds in Turkey. Kathy was visiting relatives who
lived in Turkey some years ago. They were walking out in the countryside, down an ancient primitive road that crossed an area where sheep were grazing. As they walked along the narrow dirt road, they came to a stone enclosure; it was a sheepfold.

As a priest, Kathy was especially delighted to find the kind of sheepfold described in the Gospel of John. As they were examining the sheepfold they heard a sound in the distance. A shepherd was walking toward them on the road. The shepherd was followed by a herd of sheep.

They could hear the sheep bleating in the distance, but as the flocked approached they could also hear a steady voice, blending in with the sounds of the sheep. It was the voice of the shepherd. The sheep were following him because they knew his voice. This is the way it works in real life.

The shepherd talks to the sheep, especially as the shepherd is leading the flock to a new pasture or back to an enclosure. And it is true that the sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd. The steady voice of the shepherd, and the ability of the sheep to follow the voice of their own shepherd, is crucial for a couple of reasons. First, it is common for two or three flocks of sheep to come together in one place for a period of time. In order to remain with their flock the sheep must be able to recognize the voice of their own shepherd at the end of the day when they are separated. Second, as the wool around the face of each sheep grows longer it impairs the vision of the sheep, so they must rely on their ability to recognize the voice of their own shepherd. Third, sheep tend to be anxious creatures, since they have no natural defenses against predators. The steady voice of the shepherd helps the sheep stay calm.

If we are feeling anxious it may be that we are not listening to the voice of the one who is our shepherd. If we are feeling desperate it could be we are spending too much time listening to voices of strangers when it comes to the ways of God. If we are feeling ourselves beginning to slip, it could be we are not having enough of what our Sudanese brother Abraham Dut Deng describes as a “God conversation”.

I remember when I first heard Abraham Dut Deng use this expression, the expression of the “God conversation”. Dut Deng was describing a meeting he had with some church people. He was discouraged by things that were said, by accusations that were made. He came to my office immediately after the meeting. Abraham was very disturbed, and said, “This was not a God conversation.”

We need to be engaging in some God conversations. Sometimes we sense we can have a conversation directly with God. I encourage you to have a conversation directly with God. But when you feel unable or unwilling to have a direct conversation with God, you must know you can still engage in what Abraham calls ‘a God conversation.’ I would describe this as a conversation where the things that are said and heard are said and heard with the understanding that all those present are created by God in the image of God.

It is not easy in this time of physical separation, but especially during this time of uncertainty and fear we need to be engaging in some God conversations. To borrow Abraham Dut Deng’s beautiful way with the English language, we also need to be listening to some ‘God voices’. We may not be able to hear the voice of God directly but we can hear what we might call ‘God voices’. God voices are voices of those who speak in the knowledge and love of God.

What are the God voices in your life? One of our experienced members sends me her favorite postings from Richard Rohr’s daily meditations several times each month. Richard Rohr is a God voice in her life and in my life. One of our members who does not use a computer but is really good with books and a telephone called me up a week ago to share a favorite poem. She heard a God voice in the words of the poem.

There are many loud voices around us today. It is not always easy to hear the God voices. We have to keep searching. We have to keep listening. We have to be cautious about the voices we are hearing. We have to protect our hearts and minds from voices that are directing people away from God.
This time of physical separation is not an easy time for me, because I engage in God conversations and hear God voices most easily when I am physically present with these people who are trying to be a God people, that is, all of you, members of St. Paul’s. Especially during this time of physical separation, I am searching for more God voices. I have been reading different authors and rereading old, familiar prayers.

The other day I came across one of my favorite prayers. It is a paraphrase of the Lord’s Prayer by Jim Cotter which was adapted and incorporated into the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer. In this prayer I hear a God voice. I hope you will hear it too:

_Eternal Spirit,_
_Earth-maker, pain-bearer, life-giver_  
_Source of all that is and that shall be_  
_Father and mother of us all_  
_Loving God, in whom is heaven_  
_The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!_  
_The way of your justice be followed by the people of the world!_  
_Your heavenly will be done by all created beings_  
_Your commonwealth of peace and freedom, sustain our hope and come on earth._  
_With the bread we need for today, sustain us_  
_In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us_  
_In times of temptation and test, strengthen us_  
_From trials too great to endure, spare us_  
_From the grip of all that is evil, free us._  
_For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever. Amen._