

Hearing voices

By [Christian Coon](#)

December 1, 2008

I have not baptized many adults, so those I have baptized stand out and are special to me. One was a woman I'll call Eleanor. Eleanor's hair has tight curls. She walks with a slight limp and smells a bit of cigarette smoke. She also has one of the greatest conversion stories I've ever heard, complete with a voice waking her up in the middle of a night as she slept underneath a wall hanging featuring a cross-eyed Jesus with donkeys on his shoulder.

Eleanor is an artist, which may help to explain her exuberant and quirky faith. She also battles depression, and her husband desperately needs a new liver. When she plopped down in a chair in my office the other day, she clearly lacked the exuberance I've come to love. She needed comfort and tender speech, much like Jerusalem does in the passage from Isaiah.

As we talked about everything she was going through, Eleanor told me that she'd been hearing a voice assuring her that she will be comforted, and she sensed that she was being invited into God's bosom. But she also knew the reality of her situation. Her emotional state was fragile, and her husband's physical condition was tenuous. She didn't need to be convinced that all people are grass and that grass withers.

However one wants to interpret the "voices" in this passage (members of a heavenly council?), they seem to express the totality of the human condition. They encourage action, remind the listener of God's glory, state the naked truth about how fragile we are and proclaim God's ultimate victory—which includes a homecoming, when the listener is finally in the arms of God.

At times these varied voices are overwhelming, simply too much to take in. I know they are for Eleanor. But as difficult as it is for her to wait for her depression to subside, and as anxious as she is for that phone call to come telling her that her husband has a new liver, she knows she needs those voices. In the end, they

promise a transformed life and a transformed world. Meanwhile, she waits and she listens.

Reading [*A Christmas Carol*](#) for my sermon series focusing on the classic book, it didn't take much to see a connection between Jacob Marley's ghost and John the Baptist—especially since they each have a unique belt. A parishioner reminded me, however, that contrasting the two figures is more helpful than making favorable comparisons.

John's belt is simple, a leather strap that holds up his camel-hair clothes. Marley's is different. A chain is wrapped around his waist:

It was long, and wound about him like a tail; and it was made (for Scrooge observed it closely) of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel.

Later, Scrooge wonders why Marley is fettered. Marley answers:

I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it.

This contrast makes me question Mark Twain's claim that "clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society."