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 John 10:1-4, 27
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“How Do We Know YOU Are Speaking to Us?”

I have to admit up front that discussing how we can “hear God” makes me nervous.

I mean, God spoke to Daniel through visions, Balaam through a donkey, Peter through a rooster, and of all things, he spoke to Moses out of a shrub.

Not sure how I would feel if God spoke to me like that!

Still, when God spoke, his servants listened.

Then again, have you ever wondered why there are so few prophets in the Bible? Let me give you a hint...

God asked Hosea, “Do you want to hear me speak?”

“I’d love to be your prophet.”

“Then, go marry a prostitute.”

God asked Jeremiah, “Do you want to hear me speak?”

“God, I’m too young to be a prophet; but, I’d love to hear you speak.”

So, God spoke to Jeremiah. But the price of hearing God’s message was high. The people cursed him, mocked him, tossed him in jail, and bound him in chains.

They threw him in deep wells and beat him senseless. They humiliated him in stocks in the market places.

Worst of all, the people never believed a single word he said.

One day God commanded Isaiah, “Take off your clothes.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask me why. Just take them off.”

“Well, for how long?”

“Until I tell you to put them on again.”

So, Isaiah stripped off his clothes. Imagine the scene as he walked naked down the streets of Jerusalem?

“Hey, Isaiah,” mocked the people, “where are your clothes?”

“I took them off.”

“Why?”

Can you imagine the looks when he said, “Well, I heard this voice ...”

Finally, three years later, God spoke: “Isaiah, put on your clothes and declare this word from Me:

“As I have bared your buttocks, so I will bare the buttocks of Egypt and let the Assyrians spank them.”

Can you imagine that for three years he walked around bare-bottomed? And the message wasn’t even for Israel (Isaiah 20).

Hearing God speak back then carried a high price tag.

But, let me tell you: He is still a God who says, "Listen for my voice."

And, I don't know about you, but it all makes me a little apprehensive about what he might have to say to me today.

And if God does speak to us today, how do you know the difference between a genuine movement of the Holy Spirit in your heart and, say... indigestion?

Between a special assignment from God and excess emotion that comes from too little sleep?

I mean, what if Isaiah got it wrong and only THOUGHT God told him to walk around naked for three years?

Let me ask you this: Do you expect to hear from God?

Some people say, "Well, God just doesn't talk to me." But, here is an important truth: even if you don't feel like God speaks to you—he does.

In fact, God just may be speaking to you right now. But, let's be clear—he isn't going to scream, yell and demand that you pay attention.

He may be speaking to you, but most often, he speaks in "a still small voice".

So, to hear him, you have to listen carefully. But don't worry – if you listen and listen carefully I guaranty he won't ask you to walk around San Jose NAKED!

Which brings us to this morning's first scripture text. The prophet Elijah is on the run.

He's hiding out in a cave, and the Lord speaks to him, asking "What are you doing here?"

Then, the scriptures say, "the Lord passes by."

There's an earthquake, wind, and fire – but (the scriptures carefully inform us) the Lord isn't in any of those traditional godlike manifestations.

Instead, the Lord comes to Elijah in a simpler, more ordinary way.

The Hebrew is almost impossible to translate. The King James version and the Revised Standard Version render it "a still small voice".

Our New Revised Standard Version translates it, "a sound of sheer silence."

The Hebrew word is akin to a hush, or a whisper: certainly not the bold, booming voice of God on Mount Sinai.

The revelation of God to Elijah as a hush, a whisper, a sound of sheer silence was something unprecedented in the scriptures, up to that point.

It's almost as though the biblical writer is saying to us, "Yes, I know earlier sacred writings tell of God speaking to people directly, as a resounding voice in their ears, but that's not how it really is.

"That's creative storytelling. It's poetry.

“In truth, when God speaks to us, it’s in the smallest whisper you could imagine, a sound so low and so subtle, it’s not even a sound at all.”

You probably won’t hear God in an earthquake, wind, or fire. You’ll more likely hear a still, small voice. A sound of sheer silence.

And here’s the best part, when you learn to tune in to God’s voice, it won’t be an occasional event, but an everyday part of life.

That’s why, in the New Testament, Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” 15 different times.

But first, you have to take the wax out of those ears.

If your spouse or closest friend calls you on the telephone, do you know it’s them before they tell you? Most likely you do!

But how? Because you’ve spent so much time with them, the sound of their voice and their way of saying things has become well-known to you—easy to recognize.

The same is true when it comes to our relationship with God.

If you want to get to a place where you don’t have to wonder whose voice you’re hearing—yours or God’s—you need to spend time with him.

And if we want to really hear his voice, first we need to find his frequency.

There was once a time when you had to work to tune in to a program on the radio or television set. You had to find the right frequency.

You never questioned if it was broadcasting—you knew it was—but you had to do your part to find the frequency and tune in.

So, here are a few things we can do, to make ourselves more receptive to what God is saying.

First, we’ve got to stop. That may seem perfectly obvious in this hectic world of ours, but still it needs to be said. From sunup to sundown and far into the night, most of us are constantly on the move.

I don’t mean just in a physical sense (thought that’s true often enough). Our *spirits* are restless, pulled in every different direction.

Many of us are troubled with obsessive, anxious thoughts that come to us unwanted, that we find hard to dismiss from our minds.

Many more of us live by our electronic devices — those smartphones and tablets we carry around, guaranteeing (at least, as long as they are turned on) that we are not completely masters of our own time.

If you’re a multitasker, and proud of it, that’s a wonderful thing — a useful skill for living in the digital age.

But, I’ll tell you this: you’ll never hear the voice of God in your life if you try to make that one of your multitude of tasks!

To hear God’s voice, you need to pay attention. You need to focus.

You can't tune in unless you first turn off or set aside all those devices and banish from your mind the distracting thoughts that rush in, clamoring for your attention.

To do this takes discipline. It's hard work. But it is worth it!

After you stop, you need to be still. "Be *still*, and know that I am God," says the Psalmist.

Find a place of quiet, a place of peace. Then visit that place often — whether it's a physical place, a location like a wooded path or a pristine beach, or a quiet place within your mind.

Some people find that a repetitive, mindless activity is helpful: like walking, or doing something simple with your hands — something you don't have to think about.

From time to time, try to get away for a longer period of time — a vacation or retreat.

The important thing is that you pause to discover that still point within you, and — when you do get up and return to the daily grind, that you leave a trail of bread crumbs, so you can find your way back again.

Another helpful thing to do is read. The Bible is a great place to start, but there are also devotional writings that can help you along the way.

The goal here is not to take in huge amounts of text, but rather to read slowly and meditatively, sometimes going through the same portion of text several times.

If you sense the need to linger in one spot, do so — remember, this is no contest to see how much you can read, how many words you can digest. It's a deep dive, an exploration, a slow journey of discovery.

And for heaven's sake, don't try that old game of opening up the Bible at random, pointing at one place, and reading whatever's there. That's little better than fortune-telling. It's making the Bible do all the work.

No, if you read the Bible, seek to read with understanding. Don't jump around all over the place, but stick with one biblical book or theme at a time, keeping at it until you understand it on a deep level.

And then use what you read to inform your hearing. For example, you know the two great commandments: Love God and love one another.

Love might be the best lens through which to evaluate what you think God might be saying to you.

Of course, it's immensely helpful to *pray*. Again, as with the devotional reading, this is not a matter of assembling flowery words.

Prayer is supposed to be a two-way conversation. Prayer is not just informing God of things going on in which we could use his help (he already knows about them anyway).

In prayer, we can also hear from God about what he wants for us – if we get still and listen.

Somehow a great many of us have gotten the idea that prayer is a formal and very scholarly speech to God – one that requires a seminary education to perfect. Believe me, it's not that way.

Less, often is more, when it comes to the act of prayer.

One of the most effective ways I've found to help me tune into God's word for is to journal. The way I do it is to sit at the computer and then type what I want to say to God and then wait and type out his response (basically, whatever comes into my head),

It's not always God speaking, but more often than not, when I read over what I've written – it wasn't my words!

You can also use colored pens to differentiate between your words and God's, if you don't want to use your computer.

One more practice I would like to invite you to try. Fasting. I once fasted for three days in order to really clean my mind and body so that I could be more receptive to hear what God wanted for me.

I don't recommend starting with that length of a fast – but even one day – where you are focused on God and let your other appetites go, can be amazing.

Finally, I encourage you to share your experience of spiritual discernment with others.

Stopping, being still, listening, reading and praying are all solitary activities, but we're not meant to remain in solitude all the time. God has created us for community.

One of the deepest principles of our Presbyterian expression of Christianity is that God is more likely to be active in inspiring groups than in inspiring individuals.

That's why individuals make very few decisions in Presbyterian governance. It's all about community.

We Presbyterians have a healthy skepticism about claims of individual inspiration, when that inspiration is for more than just them.

If an individual were to show up here and say, "God has told me what the mission of this church needs to be," our typical procedure will be to refer the matter to the Session, or some other group, for collective discernment.

We Presbyterians believe that, if God has indeed spoken to an individual a word of guidance and direction for the whole, then that same word of guidance and direction will show up again in the collective mind of this congregation's leadership.

Most often, though, remember God has a word just for you!

God still speaks. God continues to be as familiar to us as breathing, as near to us as prayer.

The Letter to the Hebrews explains how God does this. The very first line of that book is this:

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...”

God is eager to be in relationship with us, through Jesus Christ, who — by the Holy Spirit — is God’s active, personal presence in the world today.

You and I have a choice. We can live as though God were impossibly distant, unconcerned with the joys and the struggles of our daily lives.

Or, we can choose to live a different way: open and expectant, listening for that sound of sheer silence that is the indication of God’s presence in our daily lives.

May you know the deep and abiding joy of this kind of listening: and, in the fertile silence, may you come to hear!

Amen!