

LISTEN TO GOD
1 Samuel 3; 1-10; MARK 1: 35-39

There is a joke about a scientist who is impressed with what he knows and what science has learned. He looks heavenward and says, "God, we can almost clone humans, we can make life out of nothing, and we can take care of ourselves. We don't need you anymore! God just laughed. "You think?" God replied. "Show me how you can make humans and life!" So the scientist reached down, and grabbed a handful of soil to start making person. "Hold on!" God says. "I made that soil! Use your own dirt!" I have heard the imagined conversation between the Lord and Noah, and other fanciful and entertaining stories. But as we learned about prayer two weeks ago, prayer is not just talking with God. Prayer is also getting silent, listening for the reply of God, often in a still, small voice. We know from the gospels that Jesus heard God's voice, in words like: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased!" St. Francis of Assisi heard the voice of Jesus it is said. Franciscan sources call it a miracle when he heard a voice he believed to be Christ in 1205 during a time of meditation. He was near San Damiano, and he entered the chapel and knelt in prayer before a crucifix. He affixed his eyes on the crucifix and heard a voice say three times: "*Francis! Go and repair my church! Go and repair my church! Go and repair my church!*" And Francis replied: "Willingly, Lord." Margery Kempe in the 15th century, lived in Norfolk, England and gave vivid testimonies about the voices she heard that she believed were directly from God. Her visions and voices could be very intense. She said she not only heard the voice of God the Father, but also at another time the voice of Jesus, and at still another time, utterances that she believed to be the Holy Spirit. Also in the 15th century at the age of 12, Joan of Arc began hearing voices and experiencing visions which she said were from God. In the Bible we can read for ourselves the countless people who heard the voice of God: people like Moses, who heard God call him from out of a burning bush, and who listened to God

for the rest of his life. Deborah the Judge who clearly had gifts of prophecy including knowing the times and seasons of the Lord. She clearly heard the voice of God, in Judges 5:12. Today we were reminded of how the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. “The Word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” So Samuel mistook the voice of God when he heard” Samuel, Samuel!” thinking it was the voice of Eli the priest. But he learned it was not. The voice of God would be heard again in that land by the boy who tuned his heart to heaven’s station. And God guided him. Elijah the prophet listened to the voice of God and followed God’s holy instructions. Isaiah the prophet heard the voice of God as did every other prophet, telling the people what they had heard the Mighty One say. Elizabeth and Mary heard the voices of angels that prepared them for the birth of John, called the Baptizer, and of Jesus. Joseph too heard the voice of an angel, and Paul spoke directly to Jesus when he accepted him as Lord in the book of Acts. John, who wrote Revelation, certainly received some astounding descriptions from Jesus and heard the voice of his Lord. There are people who think that since the last biblical book was written around 95 A.D. that God no longer speaks to us. Today I suggest that just isn’t so. Contemporary Speaker and Pastor Bishop Yvette A. Flunder said at a recent Princeton Seminary Lecture where she was invited to speak: “We made our greatest mistake when we put a back cover on the [Bible,] as though God is not still speaking. We are the generation that will need to tear the back cover off of the book.... Let’s get a council at Princeton. Sit down and choose some more epistles. Because God is still speaking.” [Words shared with Central Florida Presbytery, March 5, 2022.] I believe God spoke to Billy Graham, for example, even I though wonder about the things Oral Roberts said God told him. Maya Angelou has directed others to “listen to yourself, and in the quietude you might hear the voice of God.” So how might we “tear the cover off of our Bibles,” so to speak, and believe that God is still addressing us—you and me—and still guiding prophets to speak to

world leaders; still hearing the cries of the people of the world? What prophetic or devotional words might truly point to God or to a spiritual encounter with Jesus?

First, we do not categorize people who hear the voice of God, or the voice of a departed loved one, as “delusional.” There is more than anecdotal evidence of these visions and encounter. Books that quietly are put on the shelves of Hospice communities or that are included in the “spirituality or mysticism or inspirational” sections of bookstores should be given more weight than they are. Heavenly voices and appearances are still happening often, but they are relegated to whispered words between friends, or between willing parishioners and pastors. Marcus Borg, in his book *The God We Never Knew*,” wrote: “Visions are vivid experiences of momentarily seeing into another layer or level of reality. Like a dream, they involve visual images ... and sounds, especially voices.” He then cited examples of visions and voices experienced in the Bible by Daniel, Jeremiah, and Amos. I have encouraged persons to share their experiences of visions and voices, and they have. There is an active heavenly realm that, like light peering through floorboards, we sometimes get to see; like sounds softly being heard from beyond the clouds or beyond the sunset, that we sometimes get to hear. But our world is not only noisy and chaotic; we intensify the noise and chaos with our own devices: the troubling news feeds that we either seek out or try to avoid about human suffering and war; car horns honking; motorcycles roaring their thundering straight pipes; devices that pound sounds perfectly through speakers or headphones the constant sound of a television; or a podcast. God may be amazing, but there are only rare cases where God thunders a response, like when Job was complaining about his neighbors’ advice, and God had heard enough. But otherwise, in my experience, the voice of God can be heard in quiet places; when we create the marriage of quiet and solitude that Maya Angelou called “quietude.”

Second, when we create time and space for us to hear the voice of our Creator, our Redeemer, or our Sustainer, we might hear from God. God may choose to guide us if we have the internal ears to hear. It's unlikely that we will hear the voices externally as from a public address system, but internally when the outside world is not our focus for a while. In all the times we have wanted guidance for our lives, our guide has been right there, just waiting for us to calm down and listen. When I took a group to Ireland in 2017, we found it to be an enchanting land with music that gets played seasonally like during this past week. There were places we felt especially close to God. We were reminded that Enya and her sisters, the writers and singers of much ethereal music, were from that region. Enya's sister Moya is especially spiritual in her music. Listen to one of her songs called "Hear My Prayer:" "Bring me through the darkness, hear my heart. Draw me in on this bright, new morning....Angels walk with me, guide me to the water's edge, wash away my doubts, my fears, Lord, strengthen me and bring me back to you."

There are times when heavenly lights seem to be evident; where there may be brushes of angels' wings, and voices from beyond. Some have called these "thin places" where earth and heaven seem to be closer. There are thin places not just in Ireland or Bethlehem or Israel or the Galilee. We can create them nearby with a quiet corner of life, with our focus, and our silence.

Finally, over the years since 1977, I believe I have been blessed to hear 12 words from God. The first time was in my decision to ask Mary Ann to marry me in spite of objections from my parents. I took my question to God in a time of decision when I created space and silence. In an inner voice, I heard, "*You love her:*" three words. And now 45 years later we are still together. My mother just two weeks ago said: "She turned out to be a good one." Yes, Mom! After Princeton Seminary I accepted

a call to my first congregation in Malvern, Arkansas. We went, and we grew, and God did wonderful healings, programs, and outreach ministries there. One day 3 ½ years later, a woman in the church came to me and said, “Preacher, you’re working us too hard. We don’t want all this growth and music and activity. We are a little church, and we want to stay that way.” So I talked with Mary Ann, who was used to moving every three years because her father was a Marine. She said, “We can move.” But I had to hear from God. So again, I asked, and I listened. I heard four more words: “*Your work is done.*” So after four years there, we moved here, staying far beyond Mary Ann’s usual 3 years in a community. I kept having new visions for the this congregation and new Spirit-given energy for God’s plans. Five years, fifteen years, twenty-five years, ... thirty-five years! Then Covid hit, two years ago last week. *And everything changed.* During the past two years, it has been a daily struggle to negotiate the Covid-19 epidemic. Online services; then online AND in-person services; masks or no-masks; vaccinations or no vaccinations; monoclonal antibodies or homeopathic treatments; open the church or keep it closed. People who I counted on became critical, and people I thought would never leave this congregation did. I wondered if I was the right person to keep leading this flock in the midst of that hostility. So I went back to God as I planned to move up my retirement date. I listened as I had in key times before. And this time I heard that voice that I had just heard two other times in my life: this time with five words: “*Well done. Go in peace.*” So next Sunday March 27, you can hear my full report at a noon Congregational Meeting. The congregation and God called me here. Now God has given the blessing for my departure, and I ask the congregation to concur with that. September 1, 1985 was my first day as Pastor here. September 1, 2022 will be my last day after 37 years as Pastor here, and 41 years in ordained ministry. May we all continue to listen for the guidance of God in the weeks ahead.

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