

Hearing God's Word Proclaimed

Listening for God

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1 Kings 19: 11-13 Elijah Meets God at Horeb

The Word of the Lord came to Elijah saying, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Let us pray: Holy and Gracious God, we long to be connected with you and with others, and yet our ears are not always attuned to hear your voice. We look for you in the busyness of our lives, and often we miss your murmurs, your whispers, your calling to us. Open our ears this morning to hear your Word, that its truth might set us free to be better disciples, disciples who have ears to hear your voice among all of the other voices competing for our attention. To that end, O God, I pray that you might pour through me the gift of preaching that my words might become, by a miracle of your grace, your Word, your life giving Word for us this day. Amen.

In 2002 Verizon launched a wireless advertisement that was huge success. An "everyman" character, wearing horned rimmed glasses rode on trains, buses, and to every obscure place, saying "Can you hear me now? Okay, how about now? Can you hear me now?"ⁱ Verizon's advertisement wants you to believe that wherever you are, wherever you go, you will always be in touch if you are a Verizon customer.

I have a picture in my mind's eye of God gently dropping us hints and nudging us throughout the day saying: Can you hear me now? How about now? What if your heart is racing in your chest and you are about to make a presentation? Can you hear me now? How about watching the sunset, or while you are commuting, or while you are doing homework with your kids? Can you hear me now? And if not then, how about when you kiss your kids goodnight and see their angelic faces drifting into dreamland? Can you hear me now?

Today's scripture text reminds us that God can speak to us through the worst storms of life—

through divorce and dreaded diagnosis and loss of loved ones—and in all kinds of other ways, if only we have ears to hear it. But do we?

I love the story about the Midwestern farmer who was visiting his college roommate who had moved to New York City. Walking near Times Square, the Midwesterner said, "Do you hear that cricket?" "You are crazy," the city friend replied. "It is noon, and in all of this traffic noise, you heard a cricket. C'mon man, be serious." "No, I hear a cricket," the farmer replied, and he walked down the avenue to a shrub in a large cement planter. Digging beneath the mulch, the farmer found the cricket. His friend was dumbfounded, but the farmer explained. "My ears are no different from yours, it just depends on what you are used to hearing." The farmer then grabbed a pocketful of change and threw it on the ground. Passersby scrambled for the change and it was quickly gone. "See, it just depends on what you are listening for."ⁱⁱ

The ugly truth if we are ready to face it, is that we are not used to listening for God. We simply

fail to carve out enough time to listen for what God might have to say to us. In fact, I think we might be genuinely shocked if God were to speak to us in an audible voice.

Consider this. A Newsweek survey showed some years ago that more Americans pray in any given week than work, exercise, or have sexual relations. Even the 13% of Americans who claim to be atheist or agnostic report that one in five of them pray daily.ⁱⁱⁱ So why is it that we feel perfectly fine about talking to God but feel a little uneasy about God talking back to us?

Do you remember Lily Tomlin's famous line in the play *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* when she says: "Why is it that when we speak to God we are said to be praying, but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic? Why should God's end of the line be equipped with a receiver but no mouthpiece?"^{iv}

The truth is that God speaks to us all the time, but our ears are not in tuned to hearing God. We suffer from what theologians call "spiritual mindlessness." In other words, our minds wander. We go on autopilot. Have you ever read to the bottom of the page before you realized you couldn't remember a thing you just read? Or have you ever drifted off in a sermon and not heard a word? Your mind simply wandered and you drifted. Well, snap out of it! Spiritual mindlessness is a crippling disease; it can cause you to walk through much of life, and not notice God at all.

In one of my all time favorite Bible passages, Jacob dreams of a ladder with angels ascending and descending to heaven and wakes up at Bethel and says, "Surely God was in this place and I did not know it." (Gen 28:16). How often are we just like Jacob saying, "Surely God was in this place, and I did not know it?"

They say that hindsight is 20/20 vision. Oftentimes I can look back at my own life and realize God's hand at work in my life. God guided me here, God prepared my life there, God held me through life's worst storms. I must admit, however, that more often than not, I fail to recognize God's presence in my midst. Until later when I realize "surely God was in this place, and I did not know it."

Do you remember the story of Hannah and Samuel? Hannah was barren, she desperately wanted a child, but she couldn't have children, so she prayed to God. And she prayed and prayed and prayed. Finally, God gave Hannah a child and she named him Samuel, which means "God hears." Samuel went to live in the temple and one night he heard a voice calling him. Samuel thought it was the priest Eli calling, but Eli realized it was God. Eli told Samuel to say, "speak God, for your servant is listening." (1Samuel 3: 8-9). And Samuel listens for what God has to say.

I must admit that in my own life, I have never heard God speak to me in any audible way. I have never traveled down Greenwich Avenue or the Boston Post Road and had a blinding experience where I fell off my donkey in the blinding light and my eyes were covered with scales. And yet, I will tell you as sure as I know who my parent's were, that God has spoken to me in the silence of my soul. Like many of you, I have asked God's direction at many times in my life and especially at the major crossroads of my life—where to go to college, what to do with my life, whom to marry. One of these crossroads came two years ago, as I was interviewing to become your associate minister, I had a profound experience of God speaking to me. God didn't speak *to* me, but God spoke *through* you. Most profoundly, I felt completely at home in your midst. I dreamed one night that there were flames of fire over your heads and over your houses, just as in the Pentecost passage when the Holy Spirit was given. At the

time, I took that to mean that the Holy Spirit was present in this place and that I was called here. God was present in this place, and I knew it, right away. I knew it. (Now I wonder if God wasn't giving me some warning sign that your houses are on fire with hurry and busyness. But that was another day and another sermon, one in which more than one of you reminded me that my job was to touch the nerve, not sever it.)

In our Scripture text this morning, Elijah is on the run for his life. Queen Jezebel and King Ahab are out to get him. So he flees to the mountains, and hides. Huddled in the cave, Elijah hears God calling him, and summons him to come out of the cave so that he can see YHWH God in all his power and might. A strong wind broke the mountains. But God was not in the wind. Then after the wind there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but God was not in the fire. And after the fire there was in Hebrew “dmamah daq qowl” which is most famously translated in the King James Version as a still, small voice. The New English Bible translates it as “a low murmuring voice” the New International Version as “a gentle whisper,” but the NRSV translates it as “sheer silence.” Whatever it was, it was in huge contrast to all of the cacophony of nature that had just preceded. In the calm after the storm, God speaks.

In the Bible, when God is about to speak or when something important is about to happen, the Hebrew is “Shema,” literally “Hear O Israel, listen up!” Pay attention. God is speaking.

Today God is also speaking. Open your eyes and open your ears, and you will hear what God has to say. Today we present 19 wonderful young people for confirmation. How appropriate that we confirm you today, on Pentecost, that we lay hands upon you, and that we ask God's Holy Spirit to be the single most important guiding force in your life.

You see, God is speaking. God is speaking in the lives and testimonies of these young people. God is speaking through the 27 middle schoolers and the 38 FISH who are going to spend their summer in mission work to serve others and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. God is speaking, right here, right now. Surely God is in this place, and I know it!

And God is speaking to us! God called us to expand our church, to open our doors wide to all our neighbors beyond these sacred walls. And God has prepared us for this time. God is calling us to do something great, something powerful to witness to the greatness of our God and to change the lives of those in need.

Hear O people of God, God is speaking. Shema. Pay close attention, listen up! God is speaking.

Can you hear God now?

ⁱ Many preachers have used this Verizon advertisement to explain how prayer works. None so eloquently, however than, Rev. Dr. Thomas Tewell, in a sermon entitled “Can you hear me now?” preached at FAPC, in the fall of 2004.

ⁱⁱ Homiletics Online, “*Thunder in the Mountains, Silence in the Soul.*” June 21, 1992.

ⁱⁱⁱ Newsweek: “*Talking to God: An Intimate Look at the Way We Pray.*” January 6, 1992.

^{iv} Ortberg, John. *The Life You Have Always Wanted*, p 143. This entire chapter on listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit is outstanding.