

Southport Presbyterian Church
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God Speaks
I Kings 19:9-18; I Corinthians 2:9-11

Last week, after one of the services, one of my favorite young friends asked if she could have my e-mail address. The first time I looked at my e-mail she had already written me a nice note asking if I could help her know God better and she included a picture of a beautiful wooden cross.

Not long after I wrote her back, she responded by asking me, “How do I hear God. I’ve always wanted to know.” How would you have answered her?

Before discussing Unit 5 in Henry Blackaby’s *Experiencing God*, I started a couple of groups this week asking how they would feel if someone came up to them and started the conversation by saying, “God told me that I should...” Or, “I heard God saying to me....” No matter what follows that initial statement, we immediately conjure an image in our minds of someone whose elevator doesn’t go to the top floor, someone who is a religious fanatic, or someone who is trying to “con” us out of something.

I got several answers. One response was the expected, “I would feel ‘skeptical’ or ‘nervous.’” Another said, “I would want to listen very carefully to what came next.” What would you say?

Another response was, “I would have to listen to who was making the statement. If that person was a mature follower of Jesus whom I knew well, I would have to take the statement that followed very seriously.”

I followed that question in one of the groups with, “Does God speak to you? If so, tell me about what he has said?” The first responses were some of those wonderful, but seemingly rare times when God meets us in very special ways in a time of need or discernment. We look back on those times with great reverence as major building blocks of our faith foundation.

Then another person said, “God speaks to me all the time as I regularly read the Bible.” He was quick to add that ever situation wasn’t a major, very memorable word from the Lord. Yet, God spoke to him in small, but formative ways through the Bible on a regular basis.

Today, we are going to look at the subject of God speaking to us. The first passage I want to look at together is the wonderful story of Elijah in I Kings 19:9-18. In the previous chapter, God did the impossible through Elijah, defeating 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah in a duel on Mt. Carmel. After this stunning victory, Elijah, all too human, acted a lot like we might. He became fearful of the wicked Queen Jezebel who threatened to take his life in the next twenty-four hours.

He ran for his life into the desert where he had a pity party. “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” He complained. Deeply depressed, he lay down under a tree and went to sleep.

In that utterly defeated state, God reached out to him, nurturing him and giving him instructions to go on a forty day journey to Mt. Horeb, the same mountain of Moses’ burning bush and the same mountain where God gave the Israelites the Law. That’s where we pick up the story. Listen for the Word of the Lord as it comes to us from I Kings 19:9-18.

God can speak to us anywhere and any way He chooses to do so.

God comes to Elijah in his personal solitude there in a cave on Mt. Horeb. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” God asks the burned out firebrand of a prophet.

Elijah continues to feel sorry for himself with a mantra that he has rehearsed in his mind several times as he journeyed into his wilderness of despair. He has been faithful, but Israel hasn't. Israel has destroyed their places of worship and murdered the prophets God sent to speak to them. Elijah believes that he is the only one left and his life is in jeopardy.

Rather than arguing with him or trying to dissuade him from his self-pity, God speaks to him again, telling him to go out of the cave and “stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Elijah remains where he is, seemingly paralyzed by his despair.

The Great Creator God who can speak to us anywhere and any way he chooses to do so, causes a great wind, an earthquake, and a fire to play havoc on the mountain. God is not in any of them and Elijah stays in His place, clearly unmoved.

Finally, God comes to Elijah in a gentle whisper. When Elijah hears the whisper, he moves to the mouth of the cave where he was called to go in the first place. Again, God voices the question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah responds with the same well-rehearsed mantra of self-pity.

Now that he has his attention, God tells him to go back to the desert and anoint Hazael as the King of Aram, Jehu as the King of Israel, and Elisha to succeed him as prophet. God will use them to defeat the enemy. Additionally, Elijah is told that he is not the only one left. There is a remnant of 7,000, who have been faithful to the Lord.

These words from the Lord spark a new flame of hope and courage for Elijah who is obedient in doing just what God has commanded him to do. At the end of chapter 19 we see the touching scene of the call of Elisha who obediently leaves his father's business and becomes Elijah's assistant for some on the job training.

My point in sharing this poignant story is to demonstrate how God spoke to people anytime, any where in any way He wanted to do so in Bible times. Just look at the number of times in a short passage that God spoke to the depressed Elijah. Do you think that God still has the ability and the desire to speak to us today?

Jesus, The Word, was God speaking to us.

When we move to the pages of the New Testament, we find God coming to our world in the form of a man whom John calls the “Word.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1) “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14) What is a word? It is a means of communication. Jesus, the Word, was God speaking to us in the ultimate manner.

Jesus' whole life and ministry was God speaking to us. When Jesus preached with passion calling people to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near,” (Matthew 4:17) He was God speaking to us. When Jesus taught with authority, using the everyday stuff of life as vivid metaphors of His kingdom, He was the Word of God speaking to us. When Jesus healed with compassion, He was God speaking to us showing us His power over a broken, hurting world.

The indwelling Holy Spirit is God speaking to us today.

Listen to these words from the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 2:9-11, as he talks about the Holy Spirit being God's mouthpiece to us in our world today.

In writing to the Church of Corinth, He is addressing a very secular crowd in a city known for its immorality and promiscuity. Not far from Athens, Corinth is thoroughly steeped in the intellectual philosophy of the Greeks. It is the wisdom of the indwelling Holy Spirit who can help them know the way they should live their lives as individuals. It is also the Holy Spirit who speaks to them in convicting words about how they should live life together as the Church of Jesus Christ.

Notice what this passage says to them and us today. It is the Holy Spirit who is the "Go Between," taking the great things that God desires for us and communicating or revealing them to us.

It is the Holy Spirit who indwells each of us when we receive God's gracious gift of new and abundant life in Jesus Christ. That same Holy Spirit knows the very heart, the deepest thoughts and desires of God for His people. The Holy Spirit takes what He knows and communicates to us so that we might know the mind and will of God; so that we might experience God in our every day lives.

When we allow the Holy Spirit to fill us and we listen attentively to God speaking to us, we begin to get a glimpse of what God wants us to experience. That's the idea Paul is presenting here when he paraphrases Isaiah 64:4 saying, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

Do you get the point? God uses the Holy Spirit to be His mouthpiece to speak to us what He wants us to know today. The natural question becomes, "How does God speak to us through the Holy Spirit?"

God speaks to us by the Holy Spirit in four main ways.

As I mentioned at the beginning, God can speak to us any way He desires. Certainly we cannot prescribe nor limit the ways that God through the Holy Spirit speaks to us in this age or any age. With all of that said, there are four main ways that the Holy Spirit speaks to us today.

God speaks to us by the Holy Spirit when we read and listen to the Bible. We often call the Bible "God's Word." Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

When we read the Old and New Testaments we see how God has spoken to people in the past and how He wants to speak to us today. For example, if I read the story of Elijah from I Kings 19 at a time when I am feeling alone and burned out, the Holy Spirit might speak to me about the fact that there are all kinds of followers of Jesus all around me. I am not alone. He also might tell me to get up out of my position of self-pity and go back to the place that He has called me. He isn't finished with me yet.

Last week, I mentioned that I had read a wonderful little quote from St. Augustine who said that when we read the Scriptures, it is like reading a letter from home. Do you read the Bible with the same kind of urgency and passion as you would read a letter from home?

God speaks to us by the Holy Spirit when we pray. Prayer is simply sharing our lives with all of their joys and sorrows with the Great God who created us and knows us better than

we know ourselves. When we bow before God in prayer, we realize that we are the creatures and He is the Creator; our weakness and His power; our neediness and His sufficiency; our lack of understanding and His wisdom.

Prayer often means bringing our stubborn wills into “sync” with His will. When we listen to God speak to us in prayer, we often have to make adjustments in our lives. Do you listen to God in prayer?

God speaks to us by the Holy Spirit through the circumstances of our lives. Our lives are a maze of open and closed doors, opportunities and obstacles. Often, they are completely outside of our spheres of influence. The Holy Spirit helps us to interpret them and see what God is saying to us through them.

For example, when I was here at SPC serving as a youth director and going to college, I was concerned about finding a partner with whom I could share my life and my ministry. In the process of dating, my mind had gone back to a young woman I had dated at the Moody Bible Institute. I did some detective work and found out that she was not married and was serving in a campus ministry at the University of Tulsa. I called her and asked if she would like to come and spend a weekend here in Indy and we could get caught up. She accepted my invitation.

While it wasn't what I wanted to hear, during a long conversation on Sunday afternoon, she told me that she felt that I still wasn't what she had in mind for the future. She went with me as I spoke at the Sunday evening service. After the service, she met a young co-ed from IU named Alice Hogue who was home that weekend and attending that service for the first time. In the parlor afterwards, as we were preparing to leave, she pointed to Alice and said that I should consider taking her out and getting to know her better. That was the first of several circumstances that God used to help me find the person with whom I have shared my life these past 38 years.

Are you open to hear God speak to you through the circumstances that are all around you?

God speaks to us by the Holy Spirit through the Church, the people whom He has called into his family. As was true for Elijah, God never places us in a vacuum, all by ourselves, to live the life He wants for us to live. He places us within a network of wonderfully redemptive relationships which he uses to speak to us on a regular basis.

There is no question that God uses the people of His church to speak words of comfort during times of loss and grief, hope and encouragement during times of disillusionment and despair, and guidance during seasons of discernment. As a small part of the Body of Christ, you the people of SPC are a wonderful mouthpiece through whom God speaks in powerful ways. God speaks through our words and actions not only to one another but the world around us.

Friday afternoon, I visited a man in the hospital who is a regular guest at our adult day center. He's the same guy who was having problem believing that God could forgive him for some of the things he did in WWII. After several of us had had the privilege of sharing with him the good news of forgiveness in Jesus Christ, he has told me several times that he is now “good to go.”

Well, as I with him briefly on Friday, he glowed as he shared with his nurse how much the people at the adult day center had meant to him. God has used the people of that ministry of the church to speak in a beautiful way to this dear man who is in the late winter season of his life.

God wants to speak to us and to the world through the church.

Application

Friends, this subject will be continued next week in our Youth Sunday services which are always one of the highlights of our year here at SPC. I'm really looking forward to see how God speaks to us through our youth next Sunday.

This week I was paging through the latest edition of Leadership, a magazine I get on a quarterly basis. I was moved by this story from an article by Leighton Ford. It seems that the great German theologian and preacher, Helmut Thielicke, was invited to attend one of the evenings of the 1963 Billy Graham Crusade at the Los Angeles Coliseum. Thielicke, along with several other German pastors, had been suspicious of mass rallies like those held by Graham because they remembered the way Hitler had used large gatherings to manipulate and seduce Germany.

However, in a very unexpected way, God spoke to Thielicke that evening. After the crusade he wrote to Graham:

“The evening was a profound ‘penance’ experience for me. ...When I have been asked now and again about your preaching, I have certainly not been too modest to make one or two theological observations. My evening with you made clear to me (and the Holy Spirit will have helped in doing so) that the question should be asked in the reverse form: What is lacking in me and my colleagues in the pulpit...that makes Billy Graham so necessary?”

Thielicke concluded: “We learn to see ourselves as various dabs of paint upon the incredibly colorful palette of God.” I would add, that God speaks to us in all kinds of wonderful ways when and if we are open to hear His voice.

You know that in this very room right now there are all kinds of TV, Radio, pager and cell phone signals floating around. The problem isn't with the sender. The problem is with the receiver. They only become personal and impact us if we have the proper receiver.

So it is with God. He wants to speak to you in me in all kinds of ways. What do you think He might want to say to you? Maybe like Thielicke, you and I might be surprised.

If we want to experience God and know and do His will for our lives, we have to be in an intimate relationship with Him, continually listening for what He wants to say to us. What is God saying to you today?