

Listening to the God who speaks

Let's pray.

Question: What goes on inside of you when someone says to you "**God told me...**" or "**I feel like God is leading me to...**"?

If I'm honest, there are few things that have the capacity to **encourage** me like hearing someone reference how they have heard God speak of late.

But, at the same time, if I'm honest, there are few things that have the capacity to **stir caution** in my heart and mind as hearing someone reference how they've heard God speak of late.

I think you know what I'm talking about.

I have a friend who always makes me smile in this regard. He is a second-generation Chinese Canadian – so very Canadian – more at home in Canadian culture than back in the land of his parents. He's just a few years younger than me, very well educated, has a PhD in food science. He loves God and has a beautiful, honest, wholehearted faith.

But what cracks me up most about him is when he talks about his prayer life, he'll often say, "So I was talking to God last night and sharing about this or that, and then God says, "**Dude**, why are you... or *Dude, I love you and am for you...*"

And it always cracks me up to hear my very Canadian Chinese friend describe God speaking to him with a California surfer accent!

I love it.

And I love it not just because, in his mind or imagination, God has a California surfer accent, but I love it because it's a glimpse into the reality of my friend's **relationship** with God. For him, God isn't a set of propositions and his faith merely a series of religious and moral commitments and practices. **His faith is a living relationship with a living God** – who walks and talks with Him... who loves him and guides him and teaches and comforts him.

Over the journey of his faith, he has come to know and love, to serve and follow a living God... Not in any super-star or super-spiritual way, but in an ordinary following Jesus way.

And I love it. I love it when I hear him say, "So then God said to me, '**Dude...**'"

But I know I've had a lot of other experiences, other moments, other conversations where someone has said to me: "**God told me...**" and my heart has not smiled. In truth, all my radars, my red flags, **have gone up**. Red flags of **concern**... That this doesn't sound like God, or that I'm not so sure it's God's voice they are hearing.

But how do you contradict or question what someone feels God has told them?

As many have said, **God works in mysterious ways** – so who am I to question what someone believes God has said to them?

And with that, if we're honest, there is a part of us that doesn't want to push against this **because this is something we all long to experience**, isn't it? Not to be the quirky spiritual drifter, but to simply and honestly, to truly and deeply **hear God's voice**... to hear the Living God speaking a living word to us...

Which, according to Jesus, is basic and core to the Christian life – to knowing and following Jesus.

Hear the words of Jesus in **John 10:3-4**, as he describes the Christian life as being like sheep in the flock of the Good Shepherd.

He says: "**The sheep listen to his voice** [that of the Shepherd]. He calls his own by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and his sheep follow him **because they know his voice.**"

And then a few verses later, we hear Jesus say very simply (**John 10:27**),

"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me..."

This experience – this reality – hearing, know and recognizing God's Voice – is not described as an odd and uncommon occurrence, reserved only for the **elite** or the **slightly unhinged**. No. According to Jesus, and the witness of the New Testament, hearing God's Voice

is basic and core to the Christian life – to life with Jesus – life as His disciples.

It is a normal Christian experience.

Incredible and utterly mysterious, yes.

But normal, according to Jesus. Essential, actually.

Which should not surprise us if we've read the Bible at all. In a sense, what is the Bible if not the record of God's speech, and what God's speaking, God's word **does**?

Think of **Genesis 1** – *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters... **And God said,** 'Let there be light,' and there was light..."*

And God said...

There is much we can learn **about God** from Genesis 1, but this is core to all the rest: the God who made the world is **a God who speaks** – and by His speaking He creates, brings order from chaos, names and commands, **and makes Himself known** and invites into relationship...

Which, if we keep reading the story, is not an anomaly, a rare and unusual occurrence, but is actually core to who God is – as Adam and Eve, and Abraham and Sarah, and Moses, and the children of Israel, would soon discover.

The God revealed in the biblical record is **a God who speaks**.

Which to us might seem like a ridiculously unnecessary thing to say or highlight. ***Of course God speaks! If God is God He can do anything!***

But to many of the faiths that dominate our world today (and have throughout history), ***the idea of a God who speaks*** – who speaks personal words, who speaks to make Himself known to us, who speaks to invite us into relationship and cooperative partnership with Him – is shocking, utterly foreign, ***maybe even unthinkable!***

I remember talking with a Sikh friend about God, a number of years back, and I'll never forget his shock at just the suggestion of ***knowing God*** – of a God who would speak to make Himself known to us...

For the Sikh, there is a God, ***but this God is not knowable. This God does not speak.***

For Abraham, an idol worshipper living in ancient Mesopotamia, in the region of Harran, the gods were off and away. Impersonal, unpredictable, but generally hard on you – easy to upset. They had no interest in you except what you could do for them – and they would punish you if you didn't do it. (Though they'd never actually tell you what you needed to do or how much you needed to do it).

Until one day, as accounted for us in **Genesis 12**, Abram (soon to be known as Abraham) **hears a Voice** – and the Voice is God – **speaking**. **Genesis 12:1**, "*The LORD has **said** to Abram...*"

As JI Packer once wrote, "**The core of the Bible is its story [of exactly this –] of God speaking to humanity.**"

Our God is a God who speaks.

And we know this in our bones: **we long to hear God speak** – we pray for it constantly – or at least every Sunday – for God to speak to us today through Your Word. We **long** to hear and know the living Voice of Jesus speaking to us – words that give life.

And yet, if we're honest, this longing is accompanied or complicated by a struggle we feel – a question – a conundrum we face – that probably all of us face at times.

How are we to know and recognize God's voice? How are we to listen for God's voice, and know that it is God's voice we hear?

This is what I want us to consider together this morning...

And, not surprisingly, the foundation for this – to hearing and knowing God's voice – **is scripture** itself.

I mean, just a moment ago, I led us to **John 10** and invited us to explicitly **hear the words of Jesus... to hear what God has spoken...**

Which is hugely important for us to understand – that if we long to hear and know God's voice in our lives **today** – speaking to us today – **to hear and know the God who speaks today** – then we must pay attention **to what God has already spoken...** to God's Voice and revelation in scripture... to the ways God has spoken and acted in the past...

As many have said before, (and here I'm **quoting Gordon Smith**) "We cannot know the voice of Jesus unless we are men and women of scripture."

Which isn't to say that without the Bible we can't or won't hear God's voice. *As the Bible itself attests, **God's voice is not limited to the words of scripture.*** The Spirit of God can and does speak to us through **a multitude of means.**

Many of know this by experience.

The Bible itself describes **a vast array** of means *through which* God has spoken at different times to different people – through dreams and visions, through friends and strangers, through prophets, pastors and pagans, through holy scripture, through donkeys, through creation and redemption, through the witness of people's faith *and failure*, and through a still small voice in one's soul.

God's voice is not limited to the words of Scripture. The Spirit of God can speak to us *through* virtually anything.

However, and this is vital, we need to understand that *it is primarily **through scripture*** that we are able to come **to know God**, and in this ***to cultivate the capacity to know and discern His Voice... So that when He speaks to us – through whatever means He chooses – we can know that it is, in fact, God speaking to us.***

Which is the purpose of scripture. This is the very reason that God has given us the Bible – that through it – through reading it, studying it, hearing it, meditating on it, *we would come to know God* (and not just the Bible)... that we would come **to know God** – the God who speaks today... To know what He's like, to know His character, to know what He is up to and seeking after, and in doing so, *to develop the capacity to know and discern God's voice in our lives today.*

Think about this with me. Imagine you have two friends named **Simon**. (I suspect many of us know 2 people named Simon). And you walk in on a conversation about one of them.

How would you know which Simon they were talking about?

Two ways: you could ask which Simon they were talking about, and hope they tell you. Or two, you might just know which Simon

because you know both guys and what they are saying resonates with what you know of one of them.

The more you get to know someone, the more you are able to recognize their ways, words, mannerisms, personality, priorities...

Maybe they mention something he said, and you instantly **know**, "*Simon Prittie. That's totally something Prittie would say.*"

Or they describe something he did, and you instantly **know**, "*ah, that's Goff. That's classic Simon Goff...*"

Before call display, this is what we all went through with voice recognition on the phone. You'd meet someone new and for the first while, whenever they call, you don't know who it is until they explicitly told you, but over time as you got to know them, you'd begin to instantly know it's them because you'd come to know them – to know the unique sound of their voice. Or the way they always introduce themselves. You could discern it was them ***because you had come to know them.***

This is normal relational experience.

Over time as we interact with someone, we develop a familiarity to their voice and ways... a familiarity to the way they **speak (a certain quality)**, to the spirit in which they speak (**a certain spirit**), and even to the kind of things they say or talk about (**a certain content**).

And it's the same thing with coming to know and discern God's voice in our lives. By attending to how He has revealed Himself in the past, we develop the capacity to discern His voice **today**.

And the **primary** way we do this, the primary way we develop this familiarity to God's voice is by listening to what **He has already said** to us – by attending to the story of God in scripture... the written record of his revelation in history.

*And particularly, by attending to **Jesus**...*

Let me distill this down to it's simplest level by asking a question: **What does God's Voice sound like?**

Have you ever thought about that?

What does God's Voice sound like?

It's the kind of question a kid would ask.

But it's also a question I've been asking people over the last while – asking friends.

Here and there, someone will reference how God has spoken to them – and we tend to just accept it at face value or dismiss it (most likely without saying anything).

But for a few years now, I've often just asked people (in a non-threatening way), "Tell me what you mean by that? When you say

that God spoke to you, what do you mean and how do you know it's God's Voice?"

What does God's Voice sound like?

How would you answer that question? If, over coffee with a friend, they asked you, "What does God's Voice sound like?" – What would you say?

You know what I'd say?

I'd say what I think the Bible says – that **God's Voice sounds like Jesus.**

That's what **John 1:1** tells us. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning..."*

And then in **v.14, we read**, *"And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

This verse, and the rest of the New Testament boldly declare to us that **God's voice sounds like Jesus** because ***in Jesus God has spoken.*** He is the very **Word of God...**

Which is to say that in Him, in Jesus ***we learn God's accent*** – we learn what God's voice sounds like – we learn God's character and ways, God's heart and passions and concerns – more than anywhere else.

In Jesus, we hear and know God's Voice...

It's a Voice that will always lead us in the way of Jesus – into His character and ways, into His passions and concerns, into what burns in His heart.

That's what God's Voice sounds like – ***it sounds like Jesus...***

I'll never forget **one night when I experienced** this so unexpectedly and yet so clearly.

It was about a decade ago – a few years into leading my first church – and on this particular night, **I went to bed in a knot**. I was frustrated and discouraged about a number of things. And I woke up in the night and my head started spinning and I couldn't go back to sleep. **And then Carter woke up** – he was probably one or younger at the time – and I went in to try to get him back to sleep.

But no luck. We were both up for hours.

And the whole time, as Carter cried and complained, I was drowning in discouragement, in negative thoughts about myself, things I'd done and not done, and my ability to lead my church forward...

And finally, after a long while of this, I said to God in despair, *"God, I can't handle this. My head is spinning and I'm full of thoughts that I know are not your thoughts. I need to hear Your voice. I need*

to hear Your thoughts. I need your perspective on me and this situation and my leadership..."

And I sat down and stared at Carter.

He was in his crib at this point – I'd been picking him up and putting him down in intervals hoping each time for a breakthrough.

Now at this point in the night, Carter was crying hard - doing the whole freaky-breathing cry, when he's beyond crying and can't calm himself down. Much like how I felt inside.

And in that moment, from the depths of my being, I whispered across the room to Carter, "**You're ok... You're ok Carter. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere. I love you.**"

*And I knew that in those words – words spoken from my own lips to my son Carter – **God spoke to me.***

"You're ok. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere. I love you."

Did God prompt me to say the words? I don't know.

Was God speaking to me? **Without a doubt.**

How did I know? How did I know it was God and not just my own voice?

Well, a number of things gave me confidence that it was in fact God speaking to me.

One, the words came with **authority**. The authority of **Jesus**.

Up until that moment, I could not stop the negative thoughts and voices in my head, but when I heard those words, the chaos in me was gone. As E. Stanley Jones, a Methodist Missionary to India many years ago, once wrote, "*The voice of the subconscious argues with you, tries to convince you; but the... voice of God does not argue, does not try to convince. It just speaks and it is self-authenticating.*"

As the crowds in the gospels often observed in Jesus, God's voice is authoritative, and when it commands the storm to be still, the storm is stilled. And God's voice still the storm in me. I knew I was hearing God's voice because it had a certain authority to it.

Second, I knew that it resonated with the **heart** of Jesus. It came in love to build me up. Not that God's words to us will always be upbeat and positive – God will at times rebuke us in love – but He will always do so in love. His words will never beat us up, but lift us up. And I knew this Voice to be speaking in love.

Third, the words had a certain **content**, that I knew from my knowledge of scripture, resonated with something God has said so many times before. Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mary and Joseph, and many others who found themselves called to tasks *way beyond* themselves found courage in one thing – in God's promise to *be with them*. Again and again, that is what God said to them, and this

is what would make them sufficient to the task. Not their abilities, but His presence *with them*.

"You're ok. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere. I love you."

In that moment, I knew that God had spoken to me... **I knew that Voice...**

Because, in contrast to what my heart and mind were saying, **this Voice sounded like Jesus**. It spoke with His authority, from his heart, in continuity with what He's said so many times before.

And so although Carter kept crying, and the room was still loud, in my soul I knew the peace that comes from hearing God's voice... from hearing the Living Voice of Jesus.

I don't know what God wants to say to you specifically today, but I know one thing He's saying to us. And it comes from a scene in **Mark 9**.

It's the story of the Transfiguration – where Jesus, for a moment, is revealed in His glory, before the watching eyes of Peter, James and John. It's a moment that, for us, is hard to grasp, as it was for Peter, James and John. But at the climax of the scene – with Moses and Elijah at his side, a Voice from heaven is heard – the Father speaks and this is what He says. Mark 9:7 - **"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!"**

This is my Son, whom I love. **Listen to Him!**
For in Him, God is speaking...