

Sermon Outline
Burton Memorial United Methodist Church
“Leaning in and cupping our ears to hear God’s gentle whisper”
December 28, 2025

Scripture

1 Kings 19:9-13
Matthew 25:34-36 & 40

Core Idea and purpose

Core theological ideas from earlier sermons in the series:

- None. This is a standalone sermon

Core theological idea: God often speaks to us in a gentle whisper. To hear God’s gentle whisper, we must lean in, cup our ears, and pay attention.

Challenge/purpose: To encourage people to lean in, cup their ears and pay attention so they can hear God’s gentle whisper.

The Sermon

God often speaks to us in a gentle whisper.

Yes, there are examples of God doing something dramatic to get a person’s attention. God got Moses’ attention with a burning bush that was not being consumed by the flames. The resurrected Jesus got Saul’s attention by appearing to him in such bright light that it blinded him. And the Lord dazzled the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel with a majestic vision of heaven. Most often, however, God doesn’t do anything spectacular and speaks to us in a gentle whisper.

I have a confession to make. I wish God would stop using gentle whispers and only talk to us in loud and spectacular ways. When God has something to say to us, I would prefer loud, spectacular, attention-grabbing performances. Wouldn’t it be nice if we walk outside, see a big bright rainbow and underneath in glowing red letters God tells us what we need to do? But God does not always work that way.

Why does God often speak to us in a gentle whisper? It’s like a teacher who wants to make a key point to the students. The teacher wants to make sure the students are paying attention before making the crucial point. So, just before the teacher makes the point, the teacher lowers his/her voice to almost a whisper. The students lean in, cup their ears, and stay riveted to the teacher. Their sole focus is on the teacher and whatever the teacher is saying.

Likewise, God uses a gentle whisper to get our attention when God has something important to say. When life is crazy and seems to be falling apart, and

Sermon Outline
Burton Memorial United Methodist Church
“Leaning in and cupping our ears to hear God’s gentle whisper”
December 28, 2025

we need to hear whatever God has to say, we must learn to lean in, cup our ears and pay attention to God so we can hear God’s gentle whisper.

The prophet Elijah had to learn this. He had just won a major victory over the prophets of the false god, Baal. In response, Queen Jezebel ordered Elijah’s execution. Earlier, Elijah bravely stood up to the evil King Ahab. But Queen Jezebel must have been meaner and tougher than King Ahab because when she threatened to kill him, he immediately ran away.

Although Elijah was not being a brave prophet for the Lord, God still took care of him. While on the run, Elijah stopped to rest under a broom tree. With intense anxiety, Elijah cried out, “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” He then fell asleep under the tree.

God sent an angel to feed and encourage Elijah. When he regained strength, Elijah traveled 40 days until he reached Mt. Horeb, where he hid in a cave. While hiding and quivering in the cave, Elijah told God, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

To which God replied, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” When life is hard, and seems to be falling apart, we must stand in the presence of the Lord. In other words, we must lean in, cup our ears, and pay attention to God.

Elijah did that. He went out of the cave, out of the place where he felt safe, to be in God’s presence.

- At first, he didn’t hear God’s gentle whisper because the fierce rock-shattering wind distracted him. This would be wind speeds in excess of a category 5 hurricane.
 - We experience fierce, rock-shattering winds when we receive a fatal diagnosis, a friend betrays us, or we continuously fight over trivial matters.
 - When these winds become our sole focus, we don’t hear God’s gentle whisper.
- Elijah continued to miss God’s gentle whisper when an earthquake distracted him.
 - Yes, sometimes life is so hard that it seems as if the ground beneath us is shaking and disappearing. The ground opens up and we just keep falling – nothing but air to grab onto as we fall into oblivion.
 - Again, when this becomes our sole focus, we miss God’s gentle whisper.

Sermon Outline
Burton Memorial United Methodist Church
“Leaning in and cupping our ears to hear God’s gentle whisper”
December 28, 2025

- Finally, Elijah again missed God’s gentle whisper when a raging fire distracted him.
 - Have you ever seen a home devastated by fire and the family loses everything? Life can feel like that – as if we lost everything.
 - When we watch the news, it can seem as if a fire of destruction is rampaging the world.
 - Again, when this becomes our sole focus, we miss God’s gentle whisper.

But Elijah finally leaned out, cupped his ears, and started to pay attention to God. And that’s when, despite the fierce wind, despite the mighty earthquake, and despite the raging fire, he heard God’s gentle whisper. Within God’s gentle whisper were clear instructions, encouragement, and hope. Elijah knew what he needed to do and did it because he heard God’s gentle voice.

So, how do we do that? When the world is falling apart, how do we lean forward, cup our ears, and listen for God’s gentle whisper? The answer is simple. We do this through prayer, fasting, prayerful Bible study, Christian fellowship, Christian worship, and alone time with God. Through all these disciplines, God may whisper in our ears. While praying, studying Scripture, worshipping or thinking about God, an idea suddenly pops into our heads. That may be God’s gentle whisper.

We practice these spiritual disciplines even or perhaps especially when we do not feel like it. How many of you have ever been so sad or anxious that you just didn’t feel like praying or reading the Bible? You didn’t feel like doing anything that resembled personal devotion or alone time with God. During these tough times, we must remember that faith is not a feeling but trust. So, when times are tough and we feel horrible, we lean in, cup our ears and pay attention to God, trusting that we will, at the right moment, hear God’s gentle whisper.

I remember when God spoke to me through prayer. I was a soldier stationed at Ft. Stewart, GA. I was alone in my apartment, kneeling in prayer and talking to God about what to do with the rest of my life. In other words, I was leaning in, cupping my ears, and paying attention. As I prayed, I went down a list of possibilities: stay in the Army, become a teacher, go into law enforcement, or become a preacher. When I got to the idea of becoming a preacher, an indescribable calmness overtook me, and I knew that that was what God wanted me to do.

God confirmed this a week or two later when I called my friend from college. I said to him, “Danny, you won’t believe what I decided to do.”

Sermon Outline
Burton Memorial United Methodist Church
“Leaning in and cupping our ears to hear God’s gentle whisper”
December 28, 2025

Danny replied, in a very matter of fact tone, “You’re going to be a preacher.”

As college students, we did not do anything to indicate I would become a preacher. So, I asked, “How did you know that? “

To which he answered, “When you first met my very faithful grandma, she turned to me and said, ‘That boy is going to be a preacher’ So, I’ve always known you would be a preacher.”

I have also heard God’s gentle whisper through Scripture. When I was a student pastor, I had a disagreement with the church council about whether to help a family in the community. There were many extenuating circumstances and the people who were hesitant to help the family had good reasons. I, however, felt strongly that we should help the family and it bothered me that the church may not do so.

While driving to the church council meeting that would decide the issue, I stopped my car and prayed. As I prayed, Isaiah 6 came to my mind. This is the story of God calling Isaiah to be a prophet. In this story, God tells Isaiah to deliver his messages to the Jews, whether the message is good or bad. Then God says that no one will listen to him. So, Isaiah wonders how long he will have to deliver messages to which no one will listen. God basically says for the rest of his life. Isaiah was faithful even if he wasn’t successful by human standards. God cares about faithfulness more than the human idea of success. This has informed my understanding of my God given ministry. I am to preach what God calls me to preach, despite the possible consequences. It’s faithfulness that counts.

Now, here’s the point, God could not have spoken to me through Isaiah 6 if I had not already read that passage several times. If we expect to hear God’s gentle whisper through Scripture and prayer, we must constantly read Scripture and talk to God.

If an idea comes to mind while we pray, read Scripture, or worship, how do we know it’s God’s gentle whisper and not our own idea? To help distinguish between God’s gentle voice and our own ideas, we can ask three questions. They are: 1) Does it encourage unconditional love? 2) Does it promote justice for poor, oppressed, and marginalized people? 3) Does it encourage selfless service? If you answer yes to these three questions, then you may have heard a gentle whisper from God. Remember, as revealed through the Old Testament and Jesus, God is a God of love, justice, and righteousness. So, God’s gentle whisper will not tell us to do anything that is selfish, hateful, or oppressive. In other words, God’s gentle whisper will always line up with God’s good, loving, and just character. So, if while praying, fasting, worshipping or reading the Bible,

Sermon Outline
Burton Memorial United Methodist Church
“Leaning in and cupping our ears to hear God’s gentle whisper”
December 28, 2025

an idea comes to your mind and it is line with God’s good character, try it out and see what happens. It may be a gentle whisper from God.

Let’s pray.

Sermon Outline
Burton Memorial United Methodist Church
“Leaning in and cupping our ears to hear God’s gentle whisper”
December 28, 2025

Sermon Outline

I. God often speaks to us in a gentle whisper.

A. Yes, there are examples of God doing something dramatic to get a person’s attention.

- God got Moses’ attention with a burning bush that was not being consumed by the flames.
- The resurrected Jesus got Saul’s attention by appearing to him in such bright light that it blinded him.
- And the Lord dazzled the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel with a majestic vision of heaven.

B. Most often, however, God doesn’t do anything spectacular and speaks to us in a gentle whisper.

C. I have a confession to make.

- I wish God would stop using gentle whispers and only talk to us in loud and spectacular ways.
- When God has something to say to us, I would prefer loud, spectacular, attention-grabbing performances.
 - Wouldn’t it be nice if we walk outside, see a big bright rainbow and underneath in glowing red letters God tells us what we need to do?
- But God does not always work that way.

II. Why does God often speak to us in a gentle whisper?

A. It’s like a teacher who wants to make a key point to the students.

- The teacher wants to make sure the students are paying attention before making the crucial point.
 - So, just before the teacher makes the point, the teacher lowers his/her voice to almost a whisper.

Sermon Outline
Burton Memorial United Methodist Church
“Leaning in and cupping our ears to hear God’s gentle whisper”
December 28, 2025

- The students lean in, cup their ears, and stay riveted on the teacher.
- Their sole focus is on the teacher and whatever the teacher is saying.

B. Likewise, God uses a gentle whisper to get our attention when God has something important to say.

- When life is crazy and seems to be falling apart, and we need to hear whatever God has to say, we must learn to lean in, cup our ears and pay attention to God.

III. The prophet Elijah had to learn this.

A. He had just won a major victory over the prophets of the false god, Baal.

- In response, Queen Jezebel ordered Elijah’s execution.
 - Earlier, Elijah bravely stood up to the evil King Ahab.
 - But Queen Jezebel must have been meaner and tougher than King Ahab because when she threatened to kill him, he immediately ran away.

B. Although Elijah was not being a brave prophet for the Lord, God still took care of him.

- While on the run, Elijah stopped to rest under a broom tree.
 - With intense anxiety, Elijah cried out, “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.”
 - He then fell asleep under the tree.
- God sent an angel to feed and encourage Elijah.
 - When he regained strength, Elijah traveled 40 days until he reached Mt. Horeb, where he hid in a cave.
- While hiding and quivering in the cave, Elijah told God, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your

Sermon Outline
Burton Memorial United Methodist Church
“Leaning in and cupping our ears to hear God’s gentle whisper”
December 28, 2025

prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

- To which God replied, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”
- When life is hard, and seems to be falling apart, we must stand in the presence of the Lord.
 - In other words, we must lean in, cup our ears, and pay attention to God.

C. Elijah did that.

- He went out of the cave, out of the place where he felt safe, to be in God’s presence.

D. At first, he didn’t hear God’s gentle whisper because the fierce rock-shattering wind distracted him.

- We experience fierce, rock-shattering winds when we receive a fatal diagnosis, feel betrayed by a friend, or continuously fight over trivial matters.
- When these winds become our sole focus, we don’t hear God’s gentle whisper.

E. Elijah continued to miss God’s gentle whisper when an earthquake distracted him.

- Yes, sometimes life is so hard that it seems as if the ground beneath us is disappearing and we just keep falling – nothing but air to grab onto as we fall into oblivion.
- Again, when this becomes our sole focus, we miss God’s gentle whisper.

F. Finally, Elijah again missed God’s gentle whisper when a raging fire distracted him.

- Have you ever seen a home devastated by fire and the family loses everything? Life can feel like that – as if we lost everything.

Sermon Outline
Burton Memorial United Methodist Church
“Leaning in and cupping our ears to hear God’s gentle whisper”
December 28, 2025

- When we watch the news, it can seem as if a fire of destruction is rampaging the world.
- Again, when this becomes our sole focus, we miss God’s gentle whisper.

G. But Elijah finally leaned out, cupped his ears, and started to pay attention to God.

- And that’s when, despite the fierce wind, despite the mighty earthquake, and despite the raging fire, he heard God’s gentle whisper.
- Within God’s gentle whisper were clear instructions, encouragement, and hope.
- Elijah knew what he needed to do and did it because he heard God’s gentle voice.

IV. So, how do we do that? How do we lean forward, cup our ears, and listen for God’s gentle whisper?

A. This can be especially hard when the world is falling apart.

B. The answer is simple. We do this through...

- prayer,
- fasting,
- prayerful Bible study,
- Christian fellowship,
- Christian worship, and
- alone time with God.

C. Through all these disciplines, God may whisper in our ears.

D. We practice these spiritual disciplines even or perhaps especially when we do not feel like it.

- How many of you have ever been so sad or anxious that you just didn’t feel like praying or reading the Bible?

Sermon Outline
Burton Memorial United Methodist Church
“Leaning in and cupping our ears to hear God’s gentle whisper”
December 28, 2025

- You didn’t feel like doing anything that resembled personal devotion or alone time with God.
- During these tough times, we must remember that faith is not a feeling but trust.
 - So, when times are tough and we feel horrible, we lean in, cup our ears and pay attention to God, trusting that we will, at the right moment, hear God’s gentle whisper.

V. When I heard God’s gentle whisper

A. I remember when God spoke to me through prayer.

- I was a soldier stationed at Ft. Stewart, GA.
- I was alone in my apartment, kneeling in prayer and talking to God about what to do with the rest of my life.
 - In other words, I was leaning in, cupping my ears, and paying attention.
- As I prayed, I went down a list of possibilities: stay in the Army, become a teacher, go into law enforcement, or become a preacher.
 - When I got to the idea of becoming a preacher, an indescribable calmness overtook me, and I knew that that was what God wanted me to do.
- God confirmed this a week or two later when I called my friend from college.
 - I said to him, “Danny, you won’t believe what I decided to do.”
 - Danny replied, in a very matter of fact tone, “You’re going to be a preacher.”
 - As college students, we did not do anything to indicate I would become a preacher. So, I asked, “How did you know that?”

Sermon Outline
Burton Memorial United Methodist Church
“Leaning in and cupping our ears to hear God’s gentle whisper”
December 28, 2025

- To which he answered, “When you first met my very pious grandma, she turned to me and said, ‘That boy is going to be a preacher’ So, I’ve always known you would be a preacher.”

B. I have also heard God’s gentle whisper through Scripture.

- When I was a student pastor, I had a disagreement with the church council about whether to help a family in the community.
 - There were many extenuating circumstances and the people who were hesitant to help the family had good reasons.
 - I, however, felt strongly that we should help the family and it bothered me that the church may not do so.
- While driving to the church council meeting that would decide the issue, I stopped my car and prayed.
- As I prayed, Isaiah 6 came to my mind.
 - This is the story of God calling Isaiah to be a prophet.
 - In this story, God tells Isaiah to deliver his messages to the Jews, whether the message is good or bad.
 - Then God says that no one will listen to him.
 - Isaiah then wonders how long he will have to deliver messages to which no one will listen.
 - God basically says for the rest of his life.
 - Isaiah was faithful even if he wasn’t successful by human standards.
 - God cares about faithfulness more than the human idea of success.
- This has informed my understanding of the ministry given to me by God.
 - I am to preach what God calls me to preach, despite the possible consequences.
 - It’s faithfulness that counts.

Sermon Outline
Burton Memorial United Methodist Church
“Leaning in and cupping our ears to hear God’s gentle whisper”
December 28, 2025

- Now, here’s the point, God could not have spoken to me through Isaiah 6 if I had not already read that passage several times.
 - If we expect to hear God’s gentle whisper through Scripture and prayer, we must constantly read Scripture and talk to God.

VI. If an idea comes to mind while we pray, read Scripture, or worship, how do we know it’s God’s gentle whisper and not our own idea?

A. To help distinguish between God’s gentle voice and our own ideas, we ask three questions. They are:

- 1) Does it encourage unconditional love?
- 2) Does it promote justice for poor, oppressed, and marginalized people?
- 3) Does it encourage selfless service?

B. If you answer yes to these three questions, then you may have heard a gentle whisper from God.

- Remember, as revealed through Jesus, God is a God of love, justice, and righteousness.
- So, God’s gentle whisper will not tell us to do anything that is selfish, hateful, or oppressive.
- In other words, God’s gentle whisper will always line up with God’s good, loving, and just character.

C. So, if while praying, fasting, worshipping or reading the Bible, an idea comes to your mind and it is line with God’s character, try it out and see what happens. It may be a gentle whisper from God.

Let’s pray.