

Does God Still Speak Out Loud?

Luke 3:14-17, 21-22

What gets your attention when we read the story of the baptism of Jesus? Most of the time I focus on the statement, “You are the Beloved.” The awareness that he was the “Beloved” of God must have given Jesus a deep sense of self-worth and a clear idea of mission. Sometimes I take note of the dove and the comment about the Holy Spirit, and I realize that part of the wonder of Jesus is that he developed an appreciation for the Spirit of God in his mind and heart. We have no record of what Jesus thought or experienced prior to his baptism, but the accounts that follow show him to have been what can best be described as a “spirit person.”

There is one more element in this story that has always given me pause. I have never before explored it in a sermon, but this week as I have read and re-read the gospel text, I have given it considerable thought. It’s the voice! Did you just pass over that part of the story, or did you stop and ask questions? According to Luke, after Jesus’ baptism, “there came a voice from heaven.” The voice said, “You are my beloved Son; in you I delight.” The suggestion is that the voice was the voice of God. What did it sound like? Who heard the voice? How did those who heard it respond?

The gospels reveal a little uncertainty. Matthew writes that the voice said, “This is my beloved Son” (3:17), implying that John and the people standing by heard the voice. Mark and Luke put it this way. “You are my beloved Son” (Mk. 1:11 and Lk. 3:22), indicating that perhaps Jesus alone heard the voice. I can think of one other place in the gospels where we are told that God spoke. During the experience of the transfiguration Peter, James, and John were with Jesus when a voice came from the cloud that engulfed the mountain. The voice said, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him” (Mk 9:7). The three disciples certainly heard that time.

The question, or perhaps the hope, that comes to my mind when I read these stories is this: Why doesn't God speak to us? Why does God seem to remain silent? Why are we always trying to make excuses for God's silence? I sometimes think that as a minister I am trying to explain why there is no more clarity in our faith than there is. When a person says, "Some things you accept by faith," that person is avoiding the issue.

When you scan the Bible, you find that the records say that God spoke to Abraham, that God spoke to Moses, to Samuel, to Elijah, and on and on. The prophets thundered forth, "Thus says the Lord." Presumably they all heard the voice of God. In the New Testament there is much more subtlety. Paul wrote about visions and others seemed to hear the divine in dreams. All through the Bible you read about persons who heard the voice of God or received a direct message from God? Isn't it appropriate to ask why we do not hear God's voice today? I like the comment of the little girl who stopped her Sunday School teacher during a Bible story and said, "I know all about what God did then. Tell us what God is doing now."

Wouldn't it be great if God just told us out loud what he wanted us to know and to do. Think about some problem you are wrestling with in your life. Wouldn't you like to hear what God thinks about it? We are always asking why bad things happen in the lives of good people. Don't you wish God would speak up and give us a reason? Barbara Brown Taylor tells about a minister who serves the elderly. Her parishioners struggle with poverty, poor health, and depression. She feels as though she has very little to say to them. During a workshop she said, "I have this recurrent nightmare. I had it last night. In the dream, I die and find myself standing before the house of God. When I knock, the door blows open and it is clear that no one has lived there for a very long time. The place is vacant. There are dust balls everywhere." Almost in tears

she continued, "All I want is to hear God call my by name. I would give anything just to hear God say my name." (*When God Is Silent*, pp. 24-26.)

I've been there. Haven't you? Some here might say that you don't have that problem. According to something I read last week fifteen to twenty percent of us claim to hear voices, sometimes the voice of God. My personal testimony is that I have had strong feelings of what I consider to be the sacred and I have at times felt what I thought was divine leadership in my life. But I have never heard voices! Many people have told me that they do hear voices, voices of loved ones and other voices that might be messages from God.

You have to be very cautious with that. The historian Herodotus told the story of Croesus who ruled the Lydian Empire in 546 BCE. Croesus was uncertain whether he should allow Cyrus the Persian to build up his military forces or crush him with a preemptive strike. Croesus asked the Oracle at Delphi whether he should attack Cyrus. The Oracle replied: "When Croesus has the Halys crossed/ A mighty Empire will be lost." Croesus interpreted that message as a sign to proceed with an attack. He did. And he was defeated. The empire that was lost was his own!

We are rightly skeptical about what we hear described as the "voice of God." But it's possible to be too skeptical. It's possible to have a closed mind and to miss things we need to hear and to understand. One of the best lessons I ever learned is to keep an open mind toward any subject. So, to my question, "Does God still speak out loud?", I'm going to say, "I don't know." I do believe God speaks. If there is a problem in hearing, the problem is on our end.

Whether we hear what God has to say depends a lot on how we think about God. The most common way that most Christians think of God is as a supernatural being. God is perceived to be similar to us only bigger. God is "out there" somewhere. For years one of the dominant approaches to Christian

thought held that God was “wholly other.” This supernatural being keeps his distance and intervenes in human life when he wishes (Note how easily I use the pronoun “he”.) or when he is persuaded to act by human prayer. When you think about it, it’s easy to see how we become confused about whether God actually speaks and what God says.

I was helped immensely when I came to see that Jesus saw God differently from that. For Jesus God was an immediate presence, an experiential reality. Jesus did not have to seek the presence of God. He assumed it. He did not have to call on God in a formal way in order to get God’s attention. He spoke of God as “Father” and saw God’s hand in all that happened.

Jesus, because he perceived God in creation, in life, and in events, was able to center his life and thought in God. If you study the stories I alluded to earlier, you will find that at his baptism and at the transfiguration experience, Jesus was in prayer when he heard the voice. Jesus was not surprised. You and I might be. Lily Tomlin the comic said, “When we talk to God, we are praying; when God talks to us, we are schizophrenic.” Perhaps observations like that indicate how far we are from the close relationship with God that would allow us to hear what he would say.

How we think of God is significant. Also, how we move through each day will determine how much we hear. Many persons, it seems to me, are either preoccupied or bored. They are incapable of listening to anything that is not placed before them. I don’t think I have ever been bored, but I confess to often being preoccupied with things that really don’t matter or distracted by trivia. If you review the Biblical accounts of divine-human encounters and the wider literature on spirituality, it’s striking that persons who heard voices were those who narrowed their focus, who sometimes went into the wilderness, who developed the art of listening.

Finally, don't discount our tendency to say what we think God says. We don't say it nearly as well. It bothers me to realize that in a sermon I am called to speak for God and that I might (will probably) get the message wrong. That's why I often use the expression "I think" or qualify things with something like "It seems to me." A person once said to me that I should stop mentioning my doubts and thunder forth with "the Word of God." Preachers who do not bring their doubts with them scare me.

Years ago W. H. Auden gave a reading of his poetry at Princeton University. The lecture hall was crammed with people, and there was a buzz of excitement. When the elderly poet began, few could hear. His voice was so soft that even the sound system provided no help. Persons at the front began whispering to those around them what they thought they heard the poet say. Soon the lecture hall was a din of noise. Would-be interpreters drowned out the voice of the poet. We preachers often do that, don't we?

Does God still speak out loud? I don't know. I suspect God says more than we hear. Jesus heard. He expected to hear. He took the words to heart. They directed his self-awareness and his activity. We have heard enough to be changed, haven't we? Maybe when we act on what we know, we will hear more.

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