

The Listening Life

Ask to Listen, 2019

Premise:

At the center of the Christian religion is the audacious claim that God speaks, that his people can understand him and that by listening we may join him in his work. Other religions are built around visions or sacred books, but ours is centered on a Speaking Voice: *"Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know,"* (Jer. 33:3). *"Whether you turn to the right or turn to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, 'This is the way; walk in it,'"* (Isaiah 30:21).

It is common to hear Christians talk about hearing God's voice. Sometimes we sometimes forget how absurd this sounds. People who hear other voices are said to be unstable. Those who hear *God's* voice are thought to be insane. When Frederick Beuchner, a Presbyterian minister, visited Wheaton College he was shocked at the number of kids who talked freely about hearing from God all the time. Beuchner wrote, *"If anybody said anything like that in my part of the world, the ceiling would fall in, the house would catch fire, their eyes would roll up in their heads."*

Yet when you read the Bible, the first thing you notice is that God speak, that his people can understand him and that, sometimes, this results in outrageous behavior.

"So God said to Noah, 'Build a large boat'."

"The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country'"

"God said to Moses, 'Speak to the rock before their eyes."

"The Lord said to Joshua, 'Go and stand in the river'."

"The Lord turned to Gideon and said, 'Go...and save Israel out of Midian's hand'."

All of these actions are absurd and dangerous if God has not spoken. Yet all of them are historical moments, in the life of Israel and all involved an individual who was believed to have heard from God. In fact, throughout the Bible God speaks regularly to mortals: to Moses through a burning bush, to Abimelech through a dream, to Balaam through a donkey, to Gideon through a fleece, to David through a prophet, to Elijah through a whisper, to Jeremiah through an almond tree, to Zechariah through an angel, to Paul through a blinding light. God uses everything, but mostly he uses nothing. He just speaks – *"the Lord appeared to Isaac and said..."* or *"the Lord gave this message to Jonah"* – and we are not told how. We are told, bold-faced, what the Lord said and there is never any confusion that it was God who said it. No one seems to doubt it. And God speaks to people who, in most cases, are not even seeking it. Adam isn't. Noah isn't. Abram isn't. Jacob isn't. Moses isn't. Not even the prophets are looking for a word when God barges into their routines