

The Ways that God Speaks to us Sermon - Leith 15 April Paul Trebilco  
Reading: Acts 16:6-10; Acts 15:1-29

Some people seem to have a wonderful hot-line to God. They often seem to hear God's voice, sometimes even audibly. Other people don't seem to hear God in that way. ... Its easy if you're in the 'I don't often hear from God' category to wish God spoke more often, and perhaps more audibly.

How does God speak to us? I want to suggest – uncontroversially - that he does so in lots of different ways. But first. That God does speak is absolutely fundamental to our faith.

John 1:1: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' And in John 1:14 we read that 'the Word became flesh and lived among us' – as Jesus. That Jesus is named as 'the Word' – and that he has been God the Word forever shows how fundamental it is to God that God communicates with us. That what 'the Word' is all about.

And remember Gen 1, where God speaks and creation comes into being. Gen 1:3: 'Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.' God speaks creation into being. So God is the God who speaks. God is an avid communicator. Jesus is God the Word. And God's words are powerful and life-giving. God wants to be in communication with us. Think how wonderful that is – God wants to speak to us!! Staggering even!

But how? How does God speak? Here I want to look at some passages from Acts and elsewhere to consider how God speaks to people.

1. The Holy Spirit sometimes speaks directly to people In a number of passages, we're simply told that the Holy Spirit said something to someone. Acts 8:29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." Acts 10:19 While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. Acts 11:12 The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.

Sometimes the Spirit speaks by way of stopping something. Acts 16:6-7 They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them;

2 We're not told exactly how the Spirit spoke – or how people knew it was the Spirit. Perhaps it was so clear that they simply 'knew' it was the Spirit. But we can prepare for the Spirit to speak to us. Look at this verse: Acts 13:2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said,

“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” They were in a frame of mind where the Spirit could speak.

And note that Paul is constantly praying. Phil 1:3-4: “I thank my God every time I remember you constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you’ So Paul prepares for the Spirit to speak – by spending so much time in prayer. We can be in a place and in a frame of mind where it is easier for God to speak, and we can learn to hear God’s voice too.

2. The Holy Spirit speaks through someone else. We read this: Acts 21:11 He [a prophet named Agabus] came to us and took Paul’s belt, bound his own feet and hands with it, and said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’”

Or there are prophets active in the church. Acts 11:27-28: At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius.

Clearly prophecy is an important way in which God speaks to us. There are prophets mentioned in a whole range of passages. There’s also much in the New Testament about testing prophecy so we can be sure it is from God – but that’s another topic.

3. People hear from God in a vision or a dream Ananias has a vision in which he’s told to go and find Paul: Acts 9:10-12: Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”

Or our readings: Acts 16:9-10: ‘During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.’

Note that they still have to consider the vision – and conclude that ‘God has called us’.

God still works through visions. Friend, having gone through really difficult experiences. He had said to God: ‘I know you love me, but I can’t trust you.’ Then he had a vision of God in the night – in his room. God said to him: ‘You can trust me’. Amazing!

4. Paul has a strategy  
INTERLUDE from God

My Cell phone rings and interrupts.

Has someone left their phone on ...

Oh.. sorry it's me! I better take this – its from God.

Hi. Sorry, I'm a bit busy at the moment – could I call you back ..?

How did you get my number by the way. Oh Spark gave it to you. Well so much for their privacy settings – they say not even God can get unlisted numbers out of them. I guess they were exaggerating.

You've been trying to get through to me for a while ... oh sorry, I'd had the phone on silent. But I'd blocked your number ... I didn't want you to say something that might be too ... you know difficult or upsetting. ..or uncomfortable.

I have been busy too ... Yes, I can find time to eat – I'm not that busy. Jesus had a problem with that – oh yes, you know about that don't you.

Yes, I have been talking a lot ...

You want me to stop talking for a bit so you can get a word in ... Yes, sorry I do seem to talk too much.

I don't find it easy to be still and quiet – Be still and know that you are God, and all that. Oh, you know that. Yes, I guess so...

Right ... OK. I'll try and be still and let you speak ...

Do you want me to put you on speaker phone so you can speak to everyone here ... Oh – you'll talk to them all individually – got it. You want me just to get on with the sermon and then be quiet?

Talk with you later then.

Oh and perhaps text first so I'm ready for your call.

Yes, love you too.

POINT: I find it really hard to listen to God!! BUT I believe God can and does get through to us.

But quite often in Acts we're not told anything about how Paul makes decisions. He simply goes on to the next town. How does he make decisions in these sorts of situations? Does God speak to him all the time? Take this verse for example: Acts 17:1-2: 'After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures.'

Here, he has a policy of going to synagogues and arguing from the Scriptures. Why? The good news was for Jews! Jesus was their Messiah. So it made sense for Paul to visit synagogues. But he also wants to preach the Gospel to Gentiles – to non-Jews. A number of Gentiles had attached themselves to synagogues – Luke calls them 'Godfearers'. Going to synagogues was a way of reaching these interested Gentiles as well. This seems to be a strategy on Paul's part – when he comes to a new city, he visits the synagogue. This is no less 'spiritual' for being something that Paul has clearly thought through.

But he has another strategy too: Rom 15:18-19: For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ.'

MAP

And within that, he seems to go to cities. Why? This was where the people were! Go to the city, and you get the rural people too – because they travel to the cities and then go home. Did God 'give' Paul this strategy? Or did he think it up? We're not told. Perhaps God did reveal it to him. Or perhaps he thought it through. He seems to me to be using 'inspired common sense' or 'sanctified common sense.' It was an excellent strategy. Sometimes God doesn't speak directly about something - he wants us to use our 'sanctified common sense'.

But God sometimes alters Paul's plan. Note that passage from Acts 16:6-7 again: 'They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them'.

So Paul seems to be putting his 'city-by-city' and from Jerusalem-to-Illyricum plan into action – but here God alters the plan. And Paul is fine with that – he obeys.

I remember hearing years ago that you can't steer a stationary ship. You can only steer it once its moving. Sometimes we're not sure where to go –

but we need to pray for God's guidance, think hard about what to do, come up with a plan, start – and ask God to

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direct us as we move ... Thinking strategical, logically seems to be fine – and asking God to guide us as we go.

Paul at times seems to do this. He prays, he asks God to guide, he has a strategy, and then he just makes decisions: Acts 15:36: After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."

This is in accordance with his strategy! And God seems to be fine with that!

5. An example: the Jerusalem council – Acts 15:1-29 I want to look at Acts 15:1-29, which is often called the Jerusalem council. It's a crucial time of decision making in the church. I want to look at the passage.

What can we say about this? - v1-5: There's a problem! It concerns what Gentile Christians needed to do. Did they have to become Jews to be Christians?! We shouldn't be alarmed about disagreement! Sometimes we simply see things differently and need to talk it out. - 15:6-7: 'The apostles and elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate'. - in v7f Peter argues from experience. Remember what God did with Cornelius in Caesarea. God gave the Holy Spirit to Gentiles showing they were part of God's people. Sometimes experience – ours or someone else's – is a great guide to what we should do. - in v13f, James replies. He then goes back to the OT and sees that this has been predicted by the prophet Amos (9:11f and Isa 45:21). So, in the light of what God has been doing, James sees something new in Scripture that hadn't been seen before. God is bringing the Gentiles into God's people – as God had said in Amos – and nothing in that Amos text suggests that the Gentiles are to become Jews before they can be part of God's people. James sees new things in Scripture then. - James reaches a decision. 15:19,. - But it is ratified by 'the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church (15:22). - And notice 15:28: 'For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials' Here they are reflecting on the whole process. In chap 15 to this point, they haven't said that the Spirit has guided them to a decision. They've been talking, debating and discussing. But clearly they saw the Holy Spirit as at work in their whole process. The Spirit had inspired and directed the whole discussion.

But note exactly what they say: 'it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us'

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We've been listening to the Spirit - and 'it seemed good to us ...'. This seems to be both direct guidance from the Spirit and us 'thinking about it'. When they say 'it seemed good to us', they are owning God's guidance. Perhaps at times the Spirit might tell us to do things that we think are mad. But here, they've been debating, thinking, talking - and they can see that what the Spirit is directing them to do 'seems good'.

6. Through Scripture This finally brings us again to the Bible. We've noted that James at the Jerusalem Council thought about the book of Amos. He had no 'New Testament' to fall back on - it hadn't even been started yet! But he has the OT. Of course, we have the completed Bible. And clearly God guides us through Scripture. The way James thinks about the OT (Amos in this case) is a guide for us. In the light of what has been happening, Scripture speaks to us about our experience, about what has been happening, about what should happen. God speaks through Scripture - and makes it alive. Note 2 Tim 3:14-17:

14But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, 15and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Perhaps for us this is often the main way God speaks to us.

7. To conclude What do we conclude about how God speaks to us? • God is the God who speaks. We need to listen • God speaks to us in many different ways. A direct word to us, or a word to us from someone else. A vision, a dream. Or God speaks to us in the very human process of thinking up a strategy - and then God alters it, prods us and guides us. God speaks to us through Scripture; God speaks to us in discussion and in debate.

The important thing is that God does speak.

Does everything depend on us listening? No. God is a God of Plan B - Myk Duncan preached on this some years ago. He told us how what happened to Joseph when he was sold to those traders and taken to Egypt wasn't what God wanted. But God used the situation for God. God is a God of Plan B. Everything doesn't depend on us.

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But are we listening? Have you turned your phone on? Are you like me, and doing things all the time - so God can't get through.

God speaks – we need to listen

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