

“Being Told What to Do”
April 29, 2007

Acts 9:1-9
John 21:15-19

Do you believe that God talks to you? Do you believe God talks to me ... or to anybody?

Is this God who does (or doesn't) speak to human beings simply a projection of our own dreams, fantasies, brokenness, conscience, or fears? Or is this God something *real*?

Is this God that does (or doesn't) speak something that you can control or contain, something that reassures you, like the 1970's bestseller, "I'm OK; you're OK"? Or is this God something that *challenges* as well as comforts? Is it something that calls you out into the wilderness, as well as into a loving, healing embrace?

* * *

Several months ago, I was waiting in line at a bookstore. The man in front of me was chatting with the cashier. I wasn't paying a lot of attention to their conversation until I heard these words from the other customer: "People who say that God talks to them? Oh, man, they scare me. They are some scary and creepy people!" I looked at the cashier, who already knew me as the new minister in town. She smiled, I smiled, and then I said, "Not all of us."

That moment in the bookstore was good for a chuckle, but it was and is good for more. For one thing, it takes me back to my questions. Does God speak to human beings? And if God does speak, just what kind of God is speaking, and what sorts of things is this God saying? That bookstore moment also serves as a reminder of the truth that, sometimes, the folks who think God talks to them can indeed be very, very scary.

I'm confident that each of us can come up with a list of frightening, disturbing, and disturbed people who have done horrible things because they thought God told them to. Mothers who kill their own children. Self-described Christians who gun down abortion doctors and bomb abortion clinics. Self-described Muslims who turn themselves into bombs. Crusaders of one sort or another who believe God calls them, if not to kill, then to condemn and vilify other people, people with different religious beliefs, different ideas, different sexual orientations, different skin color. Demagogues who believe that God has told them to seek, consolidate, and then abuse political power.

But I also hope each of us could also come up with a very different list of people who believe they have heard the voice of God ... people who have heard God calling them to become instruments of peace and healing, not murder and mayhem. There are people, like Matthew Sleeth, who spoke last week in Burlingame Hall, who hear the voice of God telling them to let go of the worldly power and privilege they have attained, in order to live and work for the healing of the planet. There are people, like Archbishop Oscar Romero, who hear God's call to love and stand up for their brothers and sisters who are poor, sick, persecuted, or lost in a world that seems to have forgotten them. There are people, like Martin Luther King, who, when they feel they simply cannot go on another day in their struggle for justice, hear the voice of God, and it tells them to put their trust in the Lord and to keep on keeping on.

And there are even people, who operate on a smaller scale of sacrifice and courage than that of Archbishop Romero and Dr. King, who hear the voice of God telling them to leave their profession, go back to school, and then move across the country to live, work, and pray with a bunch of people they've never met.

So I'll answer my own questions from a few minutes ago. Yes, I believe God speaks to us. No, I don't believe that God is merely a projection of our best selves or of our worst inner demons. Yes, I believe the God who speaks is real, and, yes, I believe the God who speaks is the One who challenges *and* comforts, who rebukes *and* consoles.

But, with all the instances we have of violence, intolerance, and destruction flowing from people who believe God has spoken to them, how, oh how, do we discern the voice of God in our own lives in the midst of so many other external and internal voices? How do we know, on the one hand, when we're deluding ourselves and, on the other, when we've been spoken to and called out by the One who seeks to heal and reconcile all of creation?

Well, by this point in our life together as congregation and preacher, it probably doesn't surprise you that I think part of the answer lies in here [the Bible]. I think this morning's readings can at least point us toward some answers. So let's take a look at the two stories we encounter this morning, one from the Book of Acts and the other from the Gospel of John.

The author of Acts gives us his version of how Saul the persecutor of the early church became Paul the founder, pastor, and supporter of so many churches throughout the Roman Empire. In this story, Saul is on his way to Damascus, where he plans to arrest any followers of the Way (which means any followers of Jesus) and then take them to Jerusalem. Suddenly, there is a bright light, Saul falls to the ground, and a voice asks him why he's doing what he's doing. The voice then tells Saul, "Get up. Go to Damascus, where you will be told what to do." Saul gets up, unable to see, and he goes into Damascus, where for three days he neither eats nor drinks while he waits to be told what to do next.

This is one kind of encounter with the voice of God. It is dramatic. It is simultaneously clear. It literally knocks Saul on his ... well, you know. As the book of Acts tells the story, he quickly becomes a fervent follower of the Way. This single encounter with the voice of God fundamentally changes how he understands himself and the world. But note that the last words Saul hears in this encounter are, "you will be told what to do." As dramatic and life-changing as this one moment is, it is the barest of beginnings. It's as if God is saying, "This was just something to get your attention. From now on, *keep* paying attention, and, over time, you'll hear what you need to hear."

Our other reading this morning gives us part of the story of Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to some of the disciples at the Sea of Tiberius. The men have gone fishing but have caught nothing all night. At dawn, Jesus stands on the beach and tells them to try again. When their net becomes filled with fish, they finally recognize Jesus and come to shore, where he has prepared breakfast for them. After they eat, Jesus asks Simon Peter, three times, "Do you love me?" Each time and with rising frustration and hurt, Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Each time, Jesus tells him what to do. "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep."

This is another kind of encounter with the voice of God. Because it's a story of encountering the crucified and risen Christ, it does have an inherent drama. Jesus'

presence keeps this from being an ordinary beach party. But, at the same time, this is a mundane scene. It's just a bunch of folks eating and talking together. And it is in that commonplace activity that Peter and the others hear the voice of God. There is no flash of light, no immediate, observable change in Peter, as there was in Saul. What there is, though, is that persistent question, "Do you love me?" and that persistent instruction, "Feed, tend, *care* for my lambs, my sheep ... my people, my creation."

So if we're trying to hear the voice of God in our own lives and in our life together, what do these stories from so long ago have to offer us? I think they tell us something about three important things: how the voice of God can come to us, what the content of those messages might be if they are truly from God, and how we can test our understanding of what we've heard.

First, the *how* of God's presence and voice. Saul's experience on the road to Damascus suggests that God can come to us out of the blue. That sacred voice can startle us, it can stun us, and, yes, it can knock us on our ... well, you know. It can be dramatic, utterly out of the ordinary. But ... *and* the story from the Gospel of John also suggests that God's holy voice can also come to us through friends, through people we think we already know, when we're sharing a meal and a conversation. It can come on the beach after breakfast, on a walk along the bike path, in a quiet moment with a friend, a spouse, or a partner. God can speak to us no matter where we are and no matter what we're doing. Of course, this means that God can speak when we least expect it and when we feel the least prepared for it, not solely when we're actively seeking words of comfort or guidance.

Second, the *what* of God's voice – with our human vulnerability to mistaking our own voices for God's or mistaking any of a number of cultural messages for God's, how can we discern that what we're hearing is a voice of the divine life and love? Well, for one, the voice that breaks in and demands to know what we're doing with our lives and why we're doing it, as long as it doesn't sound like a scolding or abusive parent, may well be a voice that comes from God. Life is a sacred gift, and the Holy Giver longs for us to embrace and honor it by joining in God's creative, healing work throughout creation. So when a voice comes along and asks us what in the world we think we're doing, it's probably worth our time to pay attention to the question – and to pay attention to our answer.

The story of Jesus' conversation with Simon Peter gives us another possibility. It suggests that God's voice can come, not only in the form of a question, but also in the form of a simple yet powerful commandment: *care for my people, care for my creation. Feed them; tend to them.* If we hear or sense words that urge us to reach out, to feed and to tend to our sisters and brothers, whether they are across the street or across the globe, it's probably a good bet that the words originate from God.

To put the question in a different way, does what we hear call us or push us into deeper relationship with God and with God's creation? Does it call or push us into the kind of relationship that holds us accountable for what we're doing – and failing to do – to join with God in loving and healing the world? If it does, there's a good chance that what we've heard comes from God.

Finally, how do we test our sense that what we've heard comes from a sacred source? What can we do to minimize the possibility that we've become one of those creep or truly frightening people who believe they've heard the voice of God, when in

fact they've heard the voice of mental illness or destructive self-righteousness? One way to test what we've heard, and it's not an easy thing, is to be willing to be in community with other people. Just as Saul was instructed to go into Damascus and listen to what the followers of the Way said to him and just as Simon Peter continued to fish and to minister with other disciples, we're called to worship and pray, work and play, and speak and listen within a community of people who are not of our own choosing. We're called together, to share what we believe we may have heard from God. We're called to be in community, so that what we've heard and how we interpret it gets held up to the light and to the questions of others, others who are also seeking to discern God's movement and voice in their lives.

So maybe, just maybe, we can dare to be some of those strange people who believe we hear God's voice. If we're prepared to hear that voice in both startling and mundane ways ... if what we hear asks tough questions and sends us forth to feed and tend to God's creation ... and if we are willing to tell other people what we've heard and are willing to listen to their questions and suggestions, we can be people who humbly and yet confidently trust what we've heard. We can be people who love and serve God by loving and serving God's world. Let us join in listening and in sharing what we hear.

Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
April 29, 2007