

I grew up in church, which means I grew up around people who talked about God. It also means I grew up around people talking about God talking to them. Which could get a little weird sometimes.

I remember once my parents were hanging out with some friends of theirs and I was in the room - I was probably 10 or so. And I remember the wife - her name was Betty - talking about a time she heard God speak to her. It was before she was a Christian, and she was struggling with whether to believe or not. Whether to follow God or not. She woke up one night in the middle of this struggle of faith, and a voice spoke to her. She knew in her bones it was God, and God said, "Betty, quit fighting me." So she did, and from that night forward, Betty followed Jesus.

That story left an impression on me as a child. I remember always being confused about why God didn't talk to people. After all, in the Scriptures, it happens *all the time*. People are *always* having conversations with God. Conversations like you and I have.

But I never had heard from God like that. And no one ever talked about talking with God like that, even at Church.

Until I heard my friend Betty's story, and I realized God *does* apparently still talk to people like that. I just wasn't one of those people.

So for a lot of years, I tried to become one of those people. I prayed over and over for God to speak to me like he did to people in the Bible, or to my friend Betty.

That was more than 20 years ago, and to this day, God has never spoken to me like that. I've never "heard God's voice" in the most literal sense of that sentence.

So of course as I got older, other ideas occurred to me as far as what might be happening there. After all, my mom was a psychiatric nurse, and she had a patient who talked to her space heater. Wasn't it possible that all these people who were hearing from God were actually just... crazy? That they're not hearing from anyone but themselves?

[Initial "God talks to me" image] But still... a *lot* of people claim to hear from God. And most of them don't seem crazy. They seem awesome. So maybe the problem is me. Maybe it's that I just don't have what it takes. I'm missing some essential ingredient, a spiritual antenna or something.

[Split screen two options] Most of us have resigned ourselves to one of those two positions: either we've convinced ourselves we're not spiritual enough to hear from God, or that *no one* hears from God and anyone who claims to is just crazy.

But we can't help but think about how nice it would be to hear from God. To have the sort of relationship we hear about, we read about, a rock that weathers every storm life throws our way. To have insight, direction, assurance from the mysterious and elusive God we worship every week.

What if we *could* hear from God?

Well. I've still never heard from God like Betty did. (And full disclosure: neither did Betty, as far as I know, again in her life). But both Betty and I (and the vast majority of people who follow Jesus) have

learned that just because we don't *hear* God doesn't mean God isn't speaking. In fact, quite the contrary. We've learned that God is speaking all the time, to everyone.

[Initial “God talks to me” image again] God is speaking right now, to you and me. But we don't know how to *hear* God's voice. So if we want to hear what God is saying to us, we have to learn to listen.

I know, I know... I'm a pastor, and I'm telling you God speaks to you. So you naturally think, "Maybe God speaks to *you*. In fact, I sort of assumed when I showed up you fell into one of those two categories (super-spiritual or crazy)."

You don't think God speaks to you. That if God were speaking to you, you would know it and God isn't (God doesn't), so that means either God isn't real and those folks are crazy *or* that you're missing something. You're lacking in the spirituality department and I'm about to give you the key to earning God's voice. I'm about to tell you how to become one of those people God speaks to.

But I'm not. Because God's voice isn't something we have to *earn*. That was the whole point of our Christmas celebration a few weeks ago - God has come into the world, to *everyone*.

In these weeks following Christmas, we're celebrating the fact that because Jesus has come, *everyone* can hear God's voice. We're calling this series "Is This On?" because in the wake of Christmas, God is speaking to *all of us* and the question is not "How can I earn God's attention?" but "How can I learn to hear God's voice?"

That's right... I'm suggesting that God is already speaking to you. That in fact God has been speaking to you your whole life.

In the Church world we call this common grace - that we have been surrounded by God our whole lives, so much so that much like fish are oblivious to water, we can't see God working around us, can't hear God's voice because it's become like background noise.

If we want to learn to hear God's voice, it takes two things: practice and people. Learning to hear God speaking to us doesn't happen overnight. But we can learn. Because God wants to be heard.

[Scripture Slide] If you have a Bible, turn with me to 1 Samuel 3. If you grabbed one of the free bibles in the back, you can find 1 Samuel 3 on page XXX. And please if you don't own a bible, keep that one as a gift from us.

This morning, we're going to investigate two very different stories of God speaking to people. And we'll see in both stories that what got in the way of people hearing God was their expectations. What helped them hear God was the people they'd surrounded themselves with.

In 1 Samuel 3, we meet Samuel (shocking, I know). He's a miracle baby - his mother Hannah was barren. She prayed that God would enable her to have children, and God listened. As an act of gratitude, Hannah dedicated her first son, Samuel, to God, and when he was old enough, sent him to live and work at God's temple. The priest Samuel worked for was named Eli - he was the same priest who'd spoken with Samuel's mother when she prayed for a child.

In chapter 3, Samuel is a bit older, and has been living at the Temple, working for a while. And suddenly, God speaks to Samuel. Let's take a look, beginning in verse 1:

The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am." And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord : The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. A third time the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' " So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." -- 1 Samuel 3:1-10

I find it fascinating that Samuel mistakes God's voice for Eli's. When God speaks clearly into Samuel's life, Samuel mistakes God's voice for something familiar. He interprets what's happening to him by what he knows.

I see this all the time - we attribute God's working to coincidence or to friendly advice or to a moving song. We feel *something* more, something *extra* in the experience, something that's just beyond our ability to describe, so we fall back on what we know.

Instead of stopping and saying, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Thank God Samuel was living with Eli - who in the interest of full disclosure was *not* winning Priest of the Year anytime soon, but still had at least enough love for Samuel to recognize what was happening.

Eli, the older, more seasoned follower of God, helped Samuel to interpret what was happening.

So Samuel went back, and that third time, he made himself available to God.

How often do we miss these moments in our lives? Moments in our ordinary world where God breaks into our routines and speaks to us, and we pause just for a moment because we can recognize something beautiful is happening here. We get a glimpse of a world just beyond our ordinary. We can sense... something.

But we don't have the words for it. No one has ever instructed us how to respond, so we just treat it like what we know. We smile or we tweet or we chalk it up to indigestion and we keep going.

What would happen if we stopped?

Well, apparently if we stop, things get a bit strange.

[Scripture Slide 2] Flip over in your Bibles to John 1. Again, in those free bibles, you can find John 1 on page XXX. This story centers on a guy named Nathanael, who would become one of Jesus' inner circle of followers. This is the story of how Nathanael joined the group, and surprisingly enough, it's because his friend Philip invites him. What I find fascinating about this story is Nathanael's skepticism. Let's read together, beginning in verse 43:

Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

"Come and see," said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man." -- John 1:43-51

We can tell from this story that Nathaniel knew his stuff. He was a good Jew, and he was expecting to hear from God. He was on the lookout.

The problem is that God didn't speak like he was expecting. He didn't expect God to come as a blue collar working stiff from Nazareth. Nazareth was just a spot in the middle of nowhere, where nothing important happened - think Amarillo and you'll be on the right track. Imagine someone told you God was here and he'd come from Amarillo - yeah right!

But then Jesus speaks to him and something in their exchange convinces Nathaniel. For the life of me, I wish I knew what it was.

[Can we have a ladder and a wrestler?] There are two stories that help us make some sense of what's happening here - both are about Jacob, who is one of Israel's founding fathers. Jacob has two strange encounters with God Jesus is pointing back to in this conversation with Nathaniel. Once, Jacob has a dream in which he sees a ladder stretching into Heaven, and angels climbing up and down the ladder, delivering messages from God to humanity. (That's where we get the term "Jacob's Ladder".) Jacob wakes from his dream and calls the spot Bethel, which means "House of God" -- for a long time, a temple to God stands there, which makes sense because temples were bridges from Heaven to Earth. They're where people went to hear God's voice.

The other story is from later in Jacob's life, when he's on the run. He's sort of burned every bridge he has and he ends up camped out alone, convinced he's going to die the next day. That night, God shows up and attacks Jacob. Jacob and God fight all night, until Jacob finally gets God in some sort of suplex and God gives up. Jacob demands a blessing before he lets God go, and God actually changes Jacob's name.

See, Jacob's name meant "trickster" or "deceiver". And Jacob had more than lived up to that name -- it's what led to him being on the run, afraid for his life. And God changes Jacob's name to Israel (which means 'wrestles with God').

So. Two stories of Jacob - one of a ladder to heaven for God's messengers and another of a wrestling match and a changed name.

Jesus looks at Nathaniel and says, “Here is a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

Here is a true Israel in whom there is no Jacob. Jesus is offering Nathaniel a pretty big compliment. And like most of us would be, Nathaniel is skeptical:

“How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.

And they have this little fig tree interchange I want to come back to in a minute, but then, Nathanael is *in*. Whatever Jesus saw under that fig tree convinces him and Nathanael calls Jesus the son of God and king of Israel.

Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”

But that's when Jesus goes on (and why would he need to go on?)

Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”

Jesus calls back to that vision of Jacob, with the ladder and the angels. But now instead of a ladder, Jesus puts himself there.

Jesus is calling himself the bridge between earth and heaven. Jesus is now the vehicle for the voice of God. Jesus is how God will speak to the world.

And readers of John's gospel know John is talking about the Cross. That God speaks the clearest when God dies for us.

Now, there's a whole sermon in there, too. But I want to stop just at the cusp and look back at how confused Nathanael must have been at Jesus' words. When he called Jesus the Son of God and Israel's king, he *did not* expect that king to come from Nazareth. How much less was he expecting this king to die?

Over and over, when God speaks, he undercuts our expectations.

Why come to Samuel in the middle of the night? Why come as a baby? Why come from *Nazareth*? Why allow yourself to be killed?

And yet this is how God speaks to us. God confounds our expectations. God does not say what we expect God to say. God's voice is strange.

Which is why it takes us time to learn to hear.

It took Nathanael a long time to learn how to listen to Jesus. And he wasn't alone - he had 11 other people with him practicing with him.

Because learning to hear God's voice takes patience and people.

That's how it's worked in my life. I told you before that I've never heard God's voice audibly, as cool as that would be. But I *have* learned to hear when God is speaking to me. I've learned some practices that help me to make space to listen.

And I don't always get it right. I still struggle to discern when I'm hearing from God and when I am talking to myself. But I'm getting better at it.

And while there are a few people out there who seem to hear from God in a clear, simple way, the vast majority of people I've met are more like Samuel and Nathanael (and me). It takes patience. It takes practice. And it takes people.

God doesn't speak to each of us the same way, but God does speak to each of us. And to quote Reading Rainbow, you don't have to take my word for it. Here are several Catalyst people sharing what it sounds like when *they* hear from God:

[\[video\]](#)

No one in that video learned to hear from God overnight. And none of them learned in a vacuum either. This is why we value C-Groups so much here at Catalyst. As you learn to hear God's voice, you need people you trust, people who are rooting for you, people who are on the same journey as you that you can speak with. You need people like Eli and Philip you can go to and say, "I think God is saying this to me."

And sometimes those people will say, I think you're right! And other times those same people will say, I think you're talking to yourself...

But they won't laugh at you. And they won't call you crazy. Because they're there too. They are listening and learning to hear just like you are.

God has come into the world. And that means God *is* speaking to you. Right now. If you can't hear, it doesn't mean you're not good enough. It's actually an invitation to learn, to enter into a relationship with God. In the same way no good parent is content to let their children continue babbling forever, so God invites us into the spiritual maturity that comes with learning how to hear him.

We can be sure of this because we hear God's voice clearest when he died for us. If there were any question about whether God were speaking to us, Jesus' death settled it. Jesus' death is proof that God will not leave you in silence.

So the question before you is: will you make space and time to listen for God? Will you surround yourself with some people who can help you learn to listen? (C-groups start this week, by the way, and if you want to join, you can check that box on your tear-off!)

God is speaking to you. God is calling. But learning to hear God's voice takes patience, practice and people.

Prayer of Examine

1. Where in the last week did you feel especially near to God?
2. Where in the last week did you feel especially far from God?
3. Where in the next week will you be tempted to ignore God?
4. How can you make space to listen for God this week?