

When I was in college, a book came out called *The Bible Code*. It proclaimed to use cutting edge computer technology to decipher secret messages hidden in the Bible, including a prediction of the Kennedy assassination and I think maybe the moon landing.

Since I was at a Bible college, the Bible Code was a hot topic of conversation. What I found fascinating then (and what I find fascinating now) is that people *love* stuff like the Bible Code. Even though no one we consider an "expert" - like pastors or bible scholars - take stuff like the Bible Code seriously, people go *bananas* over it.

Why?

[**God is incomprehensible**] Most of us have a conviction that God is difficult to understand. We're told that God speaks to us, that the Bible, for instance, is God's Word. Or - as we talked about last week, we hear stories of people who claim to speak with God as readily as I'm talking to you right now. But that's not *our* experience. *We* don't experience God speaking like that.

[**Decoder ring?**] So we're convinced there's a trick to it. That you have to have a special decoder ring or learn a certain religious language or be a certain kind of person because *if* God is speaking, then God is hard to understand. God communicates in codes and oracles and we're left to do our best to figure it out.

Our best hope is either to become an expert or listen to the experts. But we can't help but think that's not how it's supposed to be. We all long to be able to hear from God, to understand God clearly. So no wonder we get all excited when someone offers us a God-decoder ring, claiming to have cracked the code, finally.

It only takes a few disappointments for most of us to give up hope, to just settle into a vaguely religious routine of assuming God simply won't speak to us... or maybe can't.

Maybe the experts can know God, but us? No... for us God is impossible to know.

How cool is it that we're totally wrong? Not about the Bible Code - that's either insanity or a quick buck or both. No, we're wrong about God being unknowable. The good news for us is that God is completely knowable. That in fact God wants to be understood, and not just by the so-called professionals.

God created you. God knows you - how you work, how you think, how you see the world. And God wants to be understood. By you.

That means God is speaking to you in a language you can understand.

[**God vs. us**] This is where some of us say, Wait! Think about what you're saying. You're claiming that the eternal God, the creator and sustainer of the universe can communicate with us. That this being who is at least as far above us as we are above ants can talk to us in a way we comprehend.

This is a fair point. Serious, thoughtful people wonder: if there is a being as powerful and transcendent as is the God of the Bible, how could we possibly grasp the way this being's mind operates?

[Blind men and elephant] Many people suggest that because God is so transcendent, anything we can say about God, anything we hear from God, is necessarily partial and limited. An old Hindu legend represents this viewpoint. It tells of three blind men who encounter an elephant. One feels the elephant's leg and decides this must be a building supported by marvelous pillars. Another feels the ear and declares he's discovered a fan that will keep him cool. The third feels the trunk and decides he's found a tree branch. The three then set to arguing about who's right.

The trick of the story is that they're all right and they're all wrong. In each man's limited experience, what his sense are telling him makes sense. Because the three have different experiences, they disagree. And yet all three of them are completely wrong about the *essence* of the elephant.

[Elephant + Religions?] This is a popular story among people who like to talk about God - sit with very many people and you'll hear a version of it. Because this seems to fit our experience. We're all like blind men trying to describe this huge something we've encountered. And since we're limited by our humanity, we do the best we can. And the real kicker is that we're all right to a degree, but none of us actually has God right. None of these religions is true, and they're all true in their own ways.

This is a more and more popular understanding of God - that God is ultimately unknowable, and we're all just doing our best, so try not to fight about it too much. The problem isn't with God, but with our limited human experience.

And here's the thing - I don't disagree with a lot of that. Humans *are* inherently limited. There's no way we could *ever* understand God if we're all just trying to figure God out with what we have. Left on our own, we're all blind men groping an elephant (who, by the way, is surprisingly good-natured).

But that's the kicker. We haven't been left on our own. Despite the fact that humanity is inherently limited, despite the fact that we could never understand God on our own, God has come to us.

This is the season of the Church called Epiphany (which is a fancy word for a realization). Epiphany follows on the heels of Christmas and celebrates that because God came to us in the person of Jesus, we now all have access to God.

[Elephant says, "I'm an Elephant!] It's as though we could *become* ants and speak to ants in their own language. Or as though that elephant could speak to the blind men and explain their confusion.

Epiphany is the good news that God is speaking, and not just speaking, but speaking in a way we can understand. If you were here last week, we looked at two stories of people who heard God's voice, and saw that to hear God requires us to be patient, to practice and to surround ourselves with people who can help us.

This week, I want to investigate two more stories with you of God speaking. These two stories are remarkable on their own, but when you put them next to each other, what stands out is that God doesn't speak to everyone the same way. God speaks to each of us in language that makes sense to us.

That doesn't mean it doesn't take practice, patience and other people - it always does and always will. But it does mean that as you learn to listen for God's voice, you'll hear God speaking in some surprising and exciting places.

[Scripture Slide 1] If you have a Bible, turn with me to Jonah 3. If you grabbed one of our free bibles, you can find Jonah 3 on page XXX. And if you don't own a Bible, please keep that one as a gift from us. Now, as you're turning to Jonah 3, this is a story about a prophet named... Jonah. God sends Jonah to a city called Nineveh with a message for the Ninevites. The message is specifically one of condemnation... and if you lived in Jonah's time, you knew why. Nineveh was the capitol city of the Assyrian Empire, which was the most powerful nation in its day. Assyria ruthlessly conquered everyone around them - like all empires, they maintained their superiority through violence and the threat of violence.

There's a lot of cool stuff happening in Jonah (and it's only 4 chapters, so it's a very easy read), but I want to focus with you on what happens when Jonah gets to Nineveh in chapter 3. Let's read together, beginning in verse 1:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. -- Jonah 3:1-5

There are two surprising things about this: first is the prophecy: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." That's a *really* short sermon. In Hebrew, it's only four words. That's crazy. I would expect Jonah to give the Ninevites some more information. Like *why* they're going to be overthrown. Or *who* is going to be doing the overthrowing. Basic stuff.

But even *more* surprising, *it works*. The Ninevites repent.

What?! How could such a lousy sermon work?

There's something fascinating in that little sermon - a little word play that turns the threat into a promise. The word translated "overthrown" can also mean "overturned" or "changed". "Transformed".

And most importantly, it's passive voice - which is the grammatical way to say "Nineveh", the subject of the sentence isn't doing the action. That's important, because usually when God threatens to destroy something, he's very clear about who's doing it. The city or nation being destroyed is the object and God is the subject, the actor.

You tell em *I'm* going to destroy *them*.

That way there's no ambiguity about who's doing what when.

But here, the sentence is passive. Why the divinely bad grammar? The ambiguity is intentional: In 40 days, this city will be either destroyed (by God) or changed (by you).

So Jonah's prophecy could mean either, "In 40 days, God will destroy you." Or it could mean, "In 40 days, you'll transform yourselves." It actually means *both of those*, which makes it a threat, but also an invitation.

And that's why it worked. The Ninevites were a violent people. They lived on violence and the threat of violence. They were a "Our way or else" sort of people. So God delivers a message to them in a language they would understand. Short and direct. But full of promise.

God says to them, you have 40 days to get your act together. I won't allow you to continue to abuse the world as you are. So shape up or else.

Nineveh hears. They get it. And they respond. Because God spoke to them in a language they understood.

[Scripture Slide 2] Now turn over to Mark 1. Again, if you have one of our Bibles, you can find Mark 1 on page XXX. As you're turning to Mark 1, this is another story of Jesus calling disciples. Last week, we saw how Jesus called Nathanael. Today, we'll hear how he called his first four followers. Again, as we read this together, note how Jesus speaks to these men not in high religious language, but in language pulled from *their* everyday experiences.

Let's read together, beginning in verse 14:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him.

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. -- Mark 1:14-20

The passage begins with Jesus announcing the Kingdom of God has come -- I don't know about you, but I would expect what follows to involve a bunch of religious language, or maybe royal edicts and whatnot.

But he sees two working stiffs and calls them according to their occupation. Hey, you fish? Come with me... I'll teach you to fish for people.

Hey you build homes? Come with me... I'll teach you how to build homes that last forever.

Hey you teach? Come with me... I'll show you how to teach eternal truths.

Hey you're a banker? Come with me... I'll teach you to invest in people.

Hey you work in a steel factory? Come with me... I'll teach you to forge the hearts and minds of people.

What's amazing about Jesus is that he comes to these men and invites them into a new life that makes sense in the context of their former lives. That is not an abandoning of what they did before, but doing what they had been doing with new purpose (we see later in the gospels that these fishermen still knew how to fish and fished regularly).

God spoke to the Ninevites in language they understood.

Jesus spoke to fishermen in language they understood.

This is hugely important. Jonah didn't give the Ninevites a theology lesson. He didn't explain who the God of Israel was to them, why this god was angry or how they could change instead of be overthrown.

But what God told them was enough for them to understand.

Jesus didn't tell those first disciples he was God made flesh. He didn't explain the Trinity to them or how he was going to die for the sin of humanity. He didn't give them a theology quiz and he certainly didn't call them the way many of the prophets they were familiar with were called.

He simply said, "Hey you fish? Come with me and I'll teach you how to fish for people."

He spoke to them in a language they understood.

Because God wants to be understood. And God speaks to us in such a way that we *can* understand him.

This is where a lot of us throw our hands up and say, Sure... maybe for those people in the Bible, but God doesn't speak to *me* like that.

But could it be that God is speaking to you *in* your everyday life and you're missing it?

You want to hear something crazy?

Sure you do.

[[Movie Poster](#)] A couple of weeks ago, I saw that new Mark Walberg movie *The Gambler*. It's a good-not-great move... maybe a B-. But I kid you not, God spoke to me through the movie.

Sounds crazy, right?

But bear with me. The film is about a guy named Jim Bennett (Marky-Mark) who has every advantage in life. He's a white guy born into wealth. His debut novel was well-reviewed and his dissertation earned him a tenure-track spot at a good university. But Bennett is miserable. He wants more so he gambles. And loses. Over and over and over. Until he's literally under threat of death from loan sharks.

The movie is a progression of Bennett losing everything he has until he realizes this is the point. That he'll never find the satisfaction he's craving in things, stuff, his own talent.

As the movie came to a close, suddenly Paul's words to the Philippians flooded into my mind - "I count it all worthless trash for the sake of Christ."

In that passage, Paul is recounting all the advantages *he* has in his life. How, similar to Jim Bennett, he was set up to succeed. But in all his pursuits, he never found *life*, the true life he was looking for. All Paul's advantages and accomplishments didn't amount to anything, in the end. It was only when he found Jesus that the world made sense.

So I'm finishing up this mediocre movie, and now I'm thinking about what Paul said. And then after the movie we meet up with some friends and *they're* all recounting a conversation they'd had the other night about core beliefs. It's an idea that everyone has certain fundamental beliefs about themselves that may or may not be true, but they shape how we act. It's a great exercise to go through, and one I've done before in counseling, so I know mine. They're all discussing their beliefs and I think about mine - that I'm never quite good enough to deserve the esteem of people around me.

And I feel a sort of divine insistence in that moment, what Margaret Feinberg calls a Sacred Echo. I feel God telling me to slow down and spend some time with Jim Bennett. To consider carefully how much I'm seeking approval from others and to return again to the truth Paul celebrated - that no amount of success or acclaim is worth anything comparing to simply knowing Jesus.

That's a time I heard God speak to me through Mark Walberg. Sort of.

That's how I work - I love movies, I love stories. So I shouldn't be surprised when God uses a film, a fictional story I'm watching with some friends, to speak to me.

I know some of the more skeptical among us are still suspicious. You're asking a fair question - how did you know God was speaking to you in that movie?

Well, I didn't right away. But the film coincided with two other keys to hearing God's voice - scripture and community. The film wasn't even over before I was thinking about Paul's words to the Philippians. And to be honest, I had the reference wrong. I was sure that was all in the book of Galatians, but when I went to look it up later, it was in Philippians.

Now, I can assure you I didn't sit down to watch a Marky-Mark movie with my Bible open. And I also don't read the Bible constantly trying to think of every movie parallel I can. But because I spend time in Scripture, the words are there, ready for God to use when God wants to speak to me.

But the same message came again in my conversation with some friends. This wasn't in C-group. It wasn't a bible study. We were just out for some food after a movie. But because I have chosen to surround myself with people who love God and love me, our conversation was fertile ground for the seed planted in that movie.

Hearing God's voice isn't a magic formula. But we can make ourselves more attentive to what God is saying to us. We can put ourselves in the right place.

First, we should be sure we're providing a context to hear from God. The people of Nineveh had no context to interpret Jonah's prophecy - they didn't even know *which* God they were repenting *to*. Those fishermen didn't have a clue who Jesus really was.

We are in a better position than both of them - we can read scripture to learn who God has been, what God has done. We can use prayer to learn to listen to God, to make ourselves available to what God might be saying to us. And we can choose to be in real community with other people on the same journey as us. We can choose to invest in relationships with people who help us grow.

[Sandbox picture] If we do those kinds of things - prayer, reading Scripture, intentional community - we create a context in which we can hear God speaking. We prepare ourselves so that when we get an insight, when we hear God speaking to us in the middle of our daily, ordinary lives, we can interpret them.

The most important thing is to respond. When the Ninevites heard God's message, they immediately repented (even though they had 40 days!). When those fishermen heard Jesus' invitation, they didn't even wait until the end of the workday. They dropped their nets and followed Jesus.

So too with us. If we're suspicious we've heard God telling us something, we should respond immediately. The best way to learn to hear God's voice is to *practice*. To act and to follow and to trust. If it's *not* God's voice, you'll know soon enough. If it is, that will be confirmed too.

God speaks to us all differently because we're all different. God's voice to Nineveh didn't sound like God's call to those fishermen. Even last week, how God called Samuel and how God called Nathanael looked very different. So I can tell you how God spoke to me through a movie, but that doesn't mean you should start watching every Mark Walberg movie because God's a huge Funky Bunch fan.

No what we all can do is engage in the practices that make us available to God. We can all build a context in which God's voice is more clear. And we can commit to practice.

Spiritual Practices Guide

Choose one this week. Do it and listen!

God *is* speaking to you. And God doesn't insist you become a spiritual guru to understand. God is speaking to you in ways you can understand because God wants you to understand. The Incarnation, the Christmas miracle, is proof that God is making himself understood.

So you can approach these practices with confidence because God loves you and God wants you to hear clearly. God wants you to be able to follow because God's way is life.