

For the last month, we've been investigating the claim that God is speaking to us. We're in the season of Epiphany, which follows Christmas. If Christmas is the celebration of God becoming human - God with us, then Epiphany is the "so what?" to that. What does it matter that God is speaking to us? Who cares?

And this year, we're finding that it matters that God is with us because God is *speaking* to us. We began by learning when God speaks - God speaks to us in the midst of our chaotic lives. When our lives are in chaos, we feel God is far from us, but in fact God is near. God is *with us* (there it is again). So we can stop flailing around and *listen*.

Next we examined *where* God speaks to us, and we learned it's in the midst of a community of people who are all listening to God together. That we have to learn to hear God's voice and it takes patience, practice and other people.

Last week, we looked at *how* God speaks to us. We saw that God speaks to us in a thousand different ways, that God communicates to us in language we can understand because God wants to be understood.

And that raises an interesting question for us this week: *why* does God speak to us?

And the question behind that question is: do we really *want* God to speak to us?

[How do we illustrate anxiety and apathy?] I've found two distinct reactions to that question. The first is anxiety - it comes mostly from Christians. Believe it or not, a lot of Christians are afraid to hear God's voice. We don't *want* God to speak to us because we're convinced God will tell us to move to Africa to do mission work or something equally terrifying.

So God might be speaking, but we don't *want* to listen because we're afraid of what we'll hear.

Many of us don't have that anxiety though. What we feel when we wonder if God speaks (*if* we ask that question) is better characterized as apathy - it comes mostly from people who aren't Christians. You don't really think about the "God question" that much. You look around and see good and bad people on both sides of the coin. You find pluses and minuses to lots of different religions and at the end of the day, you are basically satisfied with your life and you can't see how God is *relevant* to your life.

So God might be speaking, but you don't care to listen because you're not convinced God is saying anything worth hearing.

Why does God speak to us? Some of us don't want to hear the answer. And some of us don't care.

I want to show you today that God wants to speak to us to heal us. To restore us. To make us more than we even thought possible.

[image?] That is predicated on the fact that we're all fractured. Like broken mirrors, we all have sharp edges in our selves, missing pieces of our identities. Places in our lives that just don't fit together. All of us crave wholeness.

So that is really where our commitment to listen to God beings: we must be willing to admit we're broken and need healing.

That's hard to admit, but if God is who God claims to be, then admitting we need help is made easier by the fact that God is our healer. As our creator, God knows how we were broken and more importantly how we fit back together. God can restore us and the good news is that God *wants* to restore us. We can admit we need help because our helper is standing by, ready to rescue us.

[Bring back first graphic?] But rescue has a price, and it means the anxious are right to be anxious - God is a threat to the way we're living. And it means the apathetic are wrong - God can and does change us when God speaks.

Why does God speak to us? God speaks to us to heal us, and to invite us to become agents of healing. To the apathetic, God offers real, concrete change. And to the anxious, God offers trustworthiness.

[How do we illustrate this?] Let's begin with the anxiety. I claim we don't have to be anxious because God is trustworthy. I know that sounds like a no-brainer: we're at church and you're a pastor so of course you're going to say God is trustworthy. But over and over I talk to people who want to trust God with their lives but are *afraid*. We're convinced deep down that God doesn't really care about us. That all God really cares about is *God's* agenda and God will use us, maybe abuse us if it means getting the job done.

You see this most clearly in the whole "move to Africa" fear. For some reason, when I was growing up in the Church, this was *the* fear. Our pastors would always tell us to give our lives to God and we would all always hold back because we were convinced if we did, God would send us to Africa as missionaries.

It wasn't really about Africa (I think most of us would've *loved* to go to Africa given the chance.). It was more that God is going to ask me to do something I really don't want to do. The assumption beneath that fear is that what God wants for me and what I want for myself aren't the same. That what God wants for me is what God wants for *God* and what I want doesn't enter into the equation. So to give my life over to God is to surrender what I want for myself. [That last bit is really the main point]

God's voice is a threat to my freedom, my identity.

And here's the thing: we're probably right.

If you have a Bible, turn with me to Deuteronomy 18. If you grabbed one of our Bibles, you can find Deuteronomy 18 on page XXX.

As you're finding Deuteronomy 18, some context: about 40 years before this scene, God's people were slaves in Egypt. To free them, God raised up Moses. Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and toward the land God had promised they could have as a nation.

On their way to the Promised Land, they stop at Mt. Horeb, where Moses was first called by God. God brings them there to establish an official relationship with them (sort of like a marriage ceremony between God and Israel). God speaks to the whole nation - establishing the vows in what we now know as the 10 Commandments.

And the people *freak out*. They are terrified when they hear God's voice. They beg Moses not to let God speak to them anymore because they're sure if they hear God's voice again, they'll die.

So Moses tells God what the people want and God reluctantly agrees. God *wants* to speak to the people, but they're afraid to hear from God.

Which is crazy, right? Except as you continue to follow their story, you see that they're not actually afraid of God. They're afraid of what God represents. Over and over, they beg to go back to being slaves. They're convinced they're a weak conquerable people. They're convinced they'll lose every fight they're in. They're convinced they're worth nothing.

So when this God of the universe speaks to them, they fall back. They *shrink* away from God's voice because God tells them *I will make you a kingdom of priests*. God tells them *I will make you into the bridge between heaven and earth*. *I will use you to redeem and restore the whole broken world*.

And they can't believe it. God's vision for their lives is too big. So they beg Moses not to let God speak to them anymore.

We might wonder how anyone could be so fearful, until we stop and look at ourselves. How many of us have ever sabotaged a healthy relationship because we can't believe we could really have something so good? We're convinced we're not worth being respected and loved and sacrificed for so when we get that, we push them away. Because it's easier to live broken than to accept healing.

How many of us can't imagine becoming peacemakers because resorting to violence is just so much easier? How many of us have the same fights over and over, the same fights that end in name-calling and tears and deep wounds and we know it's not healthy and we know those words would cut before we let them fly from our tongues but it's just *easier* to fight dirty than learning how to fight fair so we just offer half-hearted apologies and deep down we know it's just going to happen again so our whole relationship just becomes a waiting game rather than something that brings life and hope and beauty because learning to become whole is hard and it's just easier to be broken.

So yeah, we can identify with Israel.

But look for a moment: is God's voice a threat to Israel? Is what God wants for Israel really counter to what's best for Israel?

On one level, yes. Israel wants to remain slaves and God is calling them to be free.

But obviously what Israel wants is BAD. What God wants for them is BETTER.

So let's fast-forward 40 years. The Israelites have spent decades - an entire generation, following God in the desert, literally moving in circles. Not because they're lost, but because God is teaching them to trust him. One prophet later describes this as God wooing Israel.

Now, it's time to leave the wilderness. Now, Israel has learned to trust God, and Moses is giving them a sort of final send-off into the Promised Land.

And he takes a few moments to recount how afraid they were of God's voice. Let's read, beginning in verse 15:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him. For this is what you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die."

The Lord said to me: "What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name. But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death." -- Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Moses says, You were afraid of God. So one day, God will give you exactly what you asked for: a prophet like me who will bridge heaven and earth. This prophet will tell you everything you need to know.

God promises to send someone so the people don't have to be afraid. Someone who will reveal the whole of God's plan so that we can be confident, not anxious.

God's plan is, of course, that we would have life. That we would step into the freedom God created us for. God's plan is that we would abandon what we think we want - the safety of a broken life, for what God wants for us - the whole life we were created for.

But that begs the glaring question, Did that person ever come? That's where the apathy comes in - a lot of us wonder if it *matters* that God has a plan for the world. After all, *everyone* has plans. Plans are less important than being able to *execute* plans.

So what does it matter if there is a God who loves me and loves the world and wants what is best for the world if that God isn't able to *do* anything about it?

That's what many of us believe -- that whatever God is saying doesn't matter much because God doesn't affect much.

Turn over to Mark 1.

During this whole series, we've been looking at two passages of Scripture, putting them next to each other and seeing what happens. This particular story is from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He's preached a few times, and called his first followers. And now, something massive is about to happen. Let's read together beginning in verse 21:

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!"

The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. -- Mark 1:21-28

Jesus is approached by a man who's possessed - Mark calls it an "unclean spirit". The spirit knows exactly who Jesus is - no mere teacher, but the "Holy One of God". And Jesus is having none of its nonsense - he commands it to silence, then expels it from the man.

The people had already been amazed at Jesus' teaching - Mark says they perceived him to "have authority", something markedly different from the other teachers had. But now Jesus demonstrates that what he says isn't just empty words. His teaching - that God's kingdom is here, that God is the rightful king of the world and in Jesus, he has arrived to make everything right, this teaching has teeth. Jesus proves it by making this man right. He drives the unclean out of him, restoring him to health and wholeness.

In other words, Jesus' teaching is accompanied by real, tangible, observable life change. It's powerful, effective and far from irrelevant.

You want proof that what Jesus says matters? He drives out demons. He enacts justice. When he speaks, things happen.

And in case you were wondering, yes, Mark wants us to know that Jesus is the fulfillment of Moses' prophecy. Moses saw a day coming when God would send a new prophet, someone to be the bridge between God and humanity. Someone who would make God approachable.

What Moses didn't see is that God didn't *send* anyone. Jesus is not just a messenger sent from God. Jesus is God himself.

Which is crazy, but it's also so beautiful and fitting and perfect.

Because the last time God spoke, humanity trembled. We were convinced if we heard from God again, we'd die.

So God comes to us as one of us. God becomes human so that when he speaks to us, we can hear him. And his teaching isn't just a collection of good ideas. When Jesus speaks, we hear God's plan for us, for the world. We hear literal words of life.

Jesus shows us over and over what God's rule looks like, what the new life he's offering is like, a life of healing and wholeness and peace and power and over and over he proves what he's saying is true.

In other words, Jesus confronts both our anxiety about and apathy toward God. In Jesus, God has become supremely approachable. Jesus isn't a messenger from God, he *is* God. In Jesus, we have the final and full revelation of who God is.

[Jesus puzzle?] Let's be clear about what that means: every revelation of God that is not Jesus himself is partial, incomplete. It's like puzzle pieces we've been staring at, and we can *almost* see how they fit together and then the full, complete picture stands before us, revealing to us everything that had been hidden.

And now we have a choice: we can either listen to Jesus, or like Israel we can shrink back.

We can either take Jesus at his word - that the life he is offering us really is beautiful and good and true, and that through his work we really can receive it, or we can shrink back into slavery, into death, into the brokenness and fragmentation of the world around us.

It's a risk. It's scary.

But it might be worth it, too.

When I was a youth pastor, one of my favorite trips was always taking my kids to Worlds of Fun, an amusement park in Kansas City. I loved it not just because amusement parks are awesome, but because every year, we would have at least one kid who had never ridden a roller coaster before.

The whole way there, he would be harassed by the other kids. And you could see in his eyes that he desperately wanted to ride. Not just to be cool or to keep people from picking on him, but because he was 49% sure it would be amazing.

He was 51 % sure he would die though. Which is why it took all day to convince him to ride.

And when he did finally ride, even up to the moment the harness came down and the car pulled out, he was still pretty sure it was a mistake.

But then, the ride. Oh the ride.

And when it's over, every time, the kid walked a little taller, held his head a little higher. Because he'd done it. He'd taken the risk and it was *worth it*.

[Image: Anxiety and Apathy to Ambassador] I've found following God to be a lot like that. It's relatively rare that God calls you to do something crazy like move to Africa (though I have friends who have done exactly that). Most often, when we accept God's new life, God doesn't *remove* us from our lives. Rather, God sends us back into the lives we had, transformed. Made new. Healing and whole, to be agents of healing.

We become God's ambassadors, beacons of God's new life to the world around us.

We allow God to make us who God wants us to be, and we learn that this is our best selves.

This is not pop psychology. This is a real and costly truth.

We are not our best selves. We are not our true selves. We have shrunken away from who we were created to be. We have settled for broken relationships, for toxic habits. We've settled into behaviors that don't bring us life, into patterns of life that actually look like death.

And God wants to break us out of that. God wants to call to us, to drive the death out of us and bring us back to life.

That is scary, but once you take the plunge, it's oh so worth it.

God is speaking to us. And some of us don't want to listen because we're afraid that God will destroy our freedom.

We're right. God wants to destroy the stunted, backward, death-bringing habits we call life and give us *true* life. God *is* a threat to our freedom, but only because what we call freedom is actually slavery. We don't understand *true* freedom. We're like baby birds who don't want to jump out of the nest, and yet God is calling us to *fly*.

Others of us don't want to listen because we don't think God has anything worth saying. God created us and knows how to rescue and restore us. God is calling you to healing and wholeness, and God can heal you and make you whole.

The question before us is how we will respond. Will we choose to take the risk to listen to God? Will we risk hearing the voice that calls us to freedom and wholeness?

Lectio Challenge

Jesus is the creator of the universe made human. And Jesus wants to heal you, not to call you away from your true self, but to make you most wholly your true self.

Some of you are scared to take Jesus at his word because of what it will cost you. And you're right to be nervous. Following Jesus costs you your whole life. But it's the deal of a lifetime. You won't believe how cheap you got *true life*.

Others are skeptical that Jesus can actually offer you anything worth having.

Lectio explanation and challenge: Do it this week. See what happens when you allow Jesus to speak into your life.