**Hearing and Listening to God**

Sunday, August 25, 2019

Elder Carmen Nylund

William McGill wrote: “The value of consistent prayer is not that God will hear us, but that we will finally hear God.”

Charles Stanley, author of the book *How To Listen To God*, says: “I believe one of the most valuable lessons we can ever learn is how to listen to God. In the midst of our complex and hectic lives, nothing is more urgent, nothing more necessary, nothing more rewarding than hearing what God has to say.”

So, we might ask ourselves, “Why would God still want to talk to us today? Hasn’t He said enough from Genesis to Revelation?” There are several very important reasons why God still wants to communicate with each of us:

He loves us just as much as He loved the people of the Old and New Testament. We need His direction for our lives. He knows we need comfort and assurance and, most importantly - He wants us to know Him.

The definitions of hearing and listening are very similar, yet they are different. According to the dictionary, the definition of Hearing is: To perceive by the ear; to listen attentively; to learn by hearing; to receive news & information. And the definition of Listening is: To make an effort to hear something; to pay attention, give heed.

Just because we listen, doesn’t insure we hear what is being said. My mother was a perfect example of that. After my father passed away, she wanted me to give her advice on everything, because that is what my father had always done. I didn’t want to be the person to tell her what to do, but I was willing to talk things through and point out options. There came a time when she needed to make an important financial decision and we went over her options every day for more than a week. Each day I became more and more frustrated and I finally decided it was time to just go ahead and tell her what to do. So I gave her a step-by-step outline of what to do. I thought, finally, we could move onto something else. However, the next day she called and said, “I still can’t decide what to do.” She had listened to every word I said, but she didn’t hear a word I was saying. Some of you may have family members or close friends that listen, but don’t really hear. And maybe we are guilty of listening but not really hearing as well.

We hear and listen every day - Most people are born with the sense of hearing and it is something that is natural - it is something that we don’t have to learn. Even as babies we can hear the sounds around us, and as we grow, we begin to distinguish what we hear. We recognize the voices of our parents, our brothers and sisters and our friends. Later on, we listen to our husbands and wives, our children, our friends, our co-workers, and it is a natural, everyday occurrence.

But as God’s children, we may not hear the most important voice of all - the voice of our Heavenly Father. We have to learn to listen, to hear and to pay attention to what God has to say to us.

In Mark chapter 4, verse 9 we read: Then Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” We hear with our ears, but there is a deeper kind of listening with the mind and heart that is necessary in order to gain understanding.

I once read about a missionary who was translating the Bible into the Songhai language. Unable to find a word for “to believe,” he asked a native how to translate it. The native thought a second and said, “It means to hear with the heart.” That’s a perfect translation. For God doesn’t usually speak with a physical voice, but with a spiritual voice - one that can be heard by the heart alone.

We can’t always trust what we hear with our ears, but we can always trust what we hear with our heart. When we walk in the Spirit, our spiritual antennas are tuned to God and we hear what he is saying. We can be going about our everyday activities at home or at work, and we still hear God speak to us. The problem is, we don’t always walk in the Spirit and we choose to do things our own way. We are headed so fast in a given direction that if God spoke, we couldn’t hear Him.

God is aware of this problem and he uses many ways of getting our total, absolute attention.

One of the simplest ways God can get our attention is to make us restless. This restlessness is just a feeling, something we can’t quite put our finger on. But its God’s way of tapping us on the shoulder, letting us know we should get ready to hear from Him. When you become restless in your spirit, just stop and listen for His voice.

God often gets our attention by speaking to us through others. Sometimes we might be in the process of making an important decision or just considering options. We have prayed, examined the pros & cons, and yet we haven’t been led to a final decision. Perhaps the direction will come through a friend or family member when you least expect it. That is why we must learn to listen with an open heart as God speaks through others.

And, God may use unusual circumstances to get our attention. We must realize that God is present in every circumstance, every situation of our lives. There is no such thing as an accident in the life of a child of God. There are some things God may allow. There are some things that God sends. There are attention-getters that God brings into our lives, but there are no accidents.

God knows exactly what it takes in each of our lives to get our attention and He will use whatever way is best in a given situation.

So, now that God has our attention, we need to learn to identify His voice. Since, as it says in John chapter10, verse 4, we are His sheep and His sheep “know His voice,” there must be some clues as to how God will communicate with us, how we will know His voice.

When I was a child growing up and heading out to play in the afternoon, my mother would tell me, “Carmen, dinner will be ready at 5:00 o’clock. You be sure to be back home by then.” Pretty soon I would get involved in playing with my friends and 5:00 came. All of a sudden I would hear a voice calling, “Carmen, Carmen!” I knew in a split second whose voice it was. I had grown up hearing it. A thousand mothers could have called my name, but only my mother would have called my name in such a way that it got my attention. When we are a child of God, it is a natural, normal behavior to know that when God speaks; it is our Heavenly Father who has called us by name.

A question that is often asked is, “When I listen for God, how do I know if it is God speaking or some other voice?”

We may want to consider - Is what we hear consistent with God’s Word? – God’s voice will never tell us to engage in any activity or relationship that is inconsistent with the Holy Scriptures. So the better we know the Bible, the more quickly we will be able to identify His voice.

As maturing believers, if we listen to God, He will not lead us into making the wrong decision. He will protect us as we learn to walk in the Spirit. Whenever God speaks, He has our future in mind and He will cause each of us to ask, “If I make this decision, what will happen to my family, to my job, to my walk with the Lord?” God isn’t just the God of today, He’s also the God of tomorrow.

Now that God has our attention and we have some idea of how to identify His voice, the question is -- How will I hear God’s voice? How will He communicate with me? His ways are endless. Let me start with an illustration.

In the Northwest, we had a house that backed onto a greenbelt with tall fir and alder trees. During the day we could see the squirrels and birds and hear them chattering and chirping away. And occasionally, we would see a hawk. Only twice in 10 years did we see the Great Horned Owl that lived in our woods. And we really didn’t see him – just his silhouette – because he only appeared at dusk.

Yet we knew he was there. At night and in the quiet of early morning Bruce and I often heard this wonderful raptor. Sometimes he was very close and we heard him right away, but most often we heard him in the distance and we would have to strain to make sure we heard him. Sometimes one of us would quietly ask the other, “Did you hear the owl?” We would become even more quiet and our sense of hearing became more attuned to the sound.

Bruce and I would lay there listening for his call. As the owl moved closer, the call became more distinct, and we would relax our hearing because we could hear him without straining.

It made me think this is how we might hear God speaking to us. Maybe we hear him loud and clear right away. However, most often we probably hear Him in the distance – not sure if we hear Him or not. It is then we have to listen more intently – waiting for His voice to be heard more clearly.

As we listened to the owl, many times there was a second call – another owl in the distance. It was interesting to hear them interact. One owl would call, hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo. Most of the time there was a long pause and the first owl would call again – maybe even two or three times. And then, off in the distance, there was a response – hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo. You could almost hear the excitement in the call of the first owl – it was like he was saying “yes, there is another owl out there listening.” As the two birds called back and forth the calls changed – sometimes the birds came closer together – their calls louder. And sometimes the call of the second owl would come immediately on top of the first call. It was like the second owl just couldn’t wait to answer, he was so excited.

I believe this is how we may react when we hear God’s voice. At first we are hesitant to respond – “Are you sure you’re talking to me?” And then there are times we know He is calling us or talking to us, and we answer back right away – yes Lord, I hear you – speak to me again Lord. Let me hear and understand.

God used many ways to speak to the people of Old and New Testament days.

God spoke by direct revelation to Abraham, and He spoke through dreams to Daniel. God spoke through His written words – to Moses through the Ten Commandments; He spoke through His prophets, through angels – to Mary & Joseph, and through the Holy Spirit – to Paul

While we marvel at the methods God used to speak to His chosen ones of old, we are more interested in direct and meaningful communication with Him today. Thank goodness God is still in the communication business. God employs several methods of revealing Himself to contemporary believers:

The Lord’s primary ways of speaking to us today are through His Word and through the Holy Spirit. God might speak to us through nature – the sunrise, the gentle breeze, the roaring wind, the monsoon rains, a rainbow, or the sunset.

A very important way God speaks to us is through other people. The people we should listen to the most are those we live with every day; the people who love us the most, or those who pray for us.

A beautiful way God speaks to us is through music. He speaks to us through traditional hymns and praise songs, through choir anthems and instrumental music. We only have to listen and we can feel His presence. We only have to sing, and He hears our prayers and praise.

And so it is that God speaks to us in ordinary ways - in familiar places, among familiar people, in the midst of our daily routines. With God, the most ordinary time can quickly become extraordinary time. Listen closely for Him to shake up your everyday days.

In our scripture reading this morning, God called out to Samuel and Samuel thought it was Eli calling him because he did not yet know the Lord, and God’s word had not yet been revealed to him. But when he was instructed, Samuel answered the Lord – “Speak. I’m your servant, ready to listen.”

If we are going to listen to God, we must come to Him expectantly. We must be quiet - let Him do the talking. Patience is a big part of listening because God speaks to us in His time, not our time.

A reverent heart should be the foundation of hearing God. We should be in awe that we can speak to the God who hung the sun and world on nothing, the God who created all the minute details of human life. We should be humble, knowing that this same all-powerful God is willing to listen to us and to speak to us.

Wherever Jesus went and taught, He said, “He who has ears let him hear.”

Two thousand years later, we are equipped with everything necessary to confidently hear from God. We have within us the Holy Spirit. We have at our fingertips His written word. We have access to the wise counsel of people who know and love God.

Through quiet, disciplined prayer and interaction with His word and people, we can become individuals who learn to distinguish God’s voice from amid the noise of our everyday lives.

God is speaking to us today. Are you listening?