

God Told Me?

John 15:1-11

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

February 13, 2022/ 6th Sunday After the Epiphany

The title of my sermon this week (which did not make it into the bulletin entirely because of my neglect) is: “God told me?”

This week we’re talking about the question of if or how we can hear the voice of God.

We’re also talking about what we ought to make of *claims* to hear directly from God? Should we accept these uncritically? Write them off just as uncritically?

How can we talk about God’s direction in our lives, especially if it doesn’t turn out like we thought it would?

Can we mishear God’s voice? Is “God’s voice” just a different way of talking about things like intuition and feeling and instinct (“I had a sense” or “I had a peace about something”)?

This week’s theme shares some similarities with last week’s.

The language of “God told me” is deeply connected to the idea that “God chose me.” Both show up throughout Scripture and point to the deep truth that God is active and engaged in the world and uses human beings to move along the story of salvation.

Last week I mentioned a bunch of biblical figures that God chose for specific moments and reasons in the story.

After the service it was entirely rightly pointed out to me that I neglected to include any women! I mentioned Moses and David and Peter and Paul, but I said nothing of Esther or Ruth or Elizabeth or Mary, each of whom were chosen by God for specific tasks at vital moments of the story.

So, today, I’ll cite just one example of a “God told me” moment.

In Genesis 16, we read about Hagar, an Egyptian slave girl. Abraham and Sara have been told that they will be made into a great nation, but they remain childless. Sara tells Abraham to use Hagar instead of her—perhaps this will be the way the promise will be fulfilled.

Hagar conceives and Sara resents her for it and mistreats her terribly. Hagar flees into the desert where she encounters an angel of the Lord by a spring.

In language that would be echoed thousands of years later with another visitation to another young girl, the angel says, “You will give birth to a son... The Lord has heard your misery.”

The news is less promising after that because the angel says that her son, Ishmael, will be a wild, unruly, and a source of conflict with his brothers.

But Hagar hears this word from the Lord as a word of comfort. She is the only woman in all of Scripture to confer a name upon God. She says, “You are the God who sees me. I have now seen the One who sees me.”

God sees. And God speaks.

God speaks in dramatic and unobtrusive ways. God speaks to the powerful and the influential and to a frightened slave girl in the desert and everyone in between.

God speaks. The language of “God told me” points to the basic Christian conviction that God is alive and active in our world.

And yet, as we know “God told me” is a tricky phrase to use.

How do you feel when you hear someone say, “God told me _____” Or, “God led me to do _____” or “God showed me _____?”

I won’t ask for a show of hands, but if I were to guess, I would say that many of us in this room (and watching online) do not have an immediately positive reaction to these kinds of statements.

Why not? Most of us probably believe, on an abstract level, that God speaks to human beings. We would point to stories from Scripture (like the one I just shared) or perhaps important events in history as evidence for this.

But we are far more reticent to use this language ourselves. And we are often suspicious of those who use it today.

Many of us have seen this kind of language misused and abused. We have seen it used as a trump card in a play for power. There is no shortage of (almost always men) throughout history, from unscrupulous TV preachers to cult leaders and many more, who have used the language of “God told me” to manipulate people toward their own ends, to equate *their* will with *God’s* will.

In particularly sad stories, there are cases where people claim that “God told them” that someone would be healed from an illness or a disease, which can lead vulnerable and hurting people to be devastated if this doesn’t happen.

God is the ultimate trump card, after all. Saying “God told me” instantly transports a statement into a domain where, a) it claims ultimate authority; and, b) it cannot be proved or disproved.

It also becomes very difficult to admit error when the stakes have been so heightened with unambiguous “God told me” or “God told us” talk. Especially when things don’t go as we promised or expected.

Most of us have also seen “God told me” used in ways that aren’t deliberately malicious or power-hungry, but more or less innocent attempts to take the decisions we make into a more spiritual register.

Part of this is good and worthy of affirmation. We believe that God is involved and interested in the events of our everyday lives.

And so, we say things like, “God told me who to marry” or “God told me which job to pursue” or “God told me to confront you about this or that error in your theology.”

Sometimes this may be true. But again, it’s hard to verify as these statements rely on individuals’ subjective experiences.

And there is also the basic truth the will of God is very often wide and general and allows us all kinds of freedom within it to choose. I think we sometimes assume a specificity for God’s will in our lives that isn’t accurate or helpful.

Naomi and I were discussing this on a walk earlier this week (she asked this week’s question and told me it was ok to share this). I asked her, “Wait, so you don’t think that God told you to marry me or that God specifically brought us together?” Her response was, “No, I think we were just

kids who had fun together in youth group.” I doubt these kinds of sentiments will find its way on to many Valentine’s Day cards tomorrow. I promptly rebuked her for her bad theology ☺).

But sometimes we imagine God’s will in far too specific terms. I think that God is more interested in the kinds of people we are becoming than the specifics of what we do at any given moment. God can accomplish his purposes in our character in a wide variety of ways.

Finally, there is also just plain old human sin and error. This is a theme that has woven its way throughout our Faith Questions series this year.

We are not infallible listeners or interpreters! This is true of basic human communication to say nothing of the divine.

The last few weeks (months, years) have made this plain. Whether it’s the pandemic or the protests or the general polarization of our discourse, I have been struck recently by how difficult it is to communicate well, how easily words are misconstrued or misunderstood or misspoken or misdirected, how poor we often are at listening.

The gap between “what we say” and “what someone else hears” often seems like a chasm that is virtually impossible to cross.

So, communication—speaking, listening, hearing accurately—is hard (even on the human level). We are decidedly imperfect listeners.

I heard a memorable way of putting this on a podcast on my drive in this morning: “Human beings are not divided into saints and sinners but sinners who imagine themselves to be saints and saints who know themselves to be sinners.”

Perhaps this all sounds a bit bleak—like it’s virtually impossible to hear from one another well, much less God! Would it be safer to just abandon “God told me” from our vocabularies?

Well, to return to a question that Jen asked a few weeks ago in her sermon about evangelism in the aftermath of colonialism, “Does the abuse or misuse of a good thing mean that we don’t do it anymore?”

Not surprisingly, I think the answer is, “no.”

The gospel of John begins with the well-known words,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

These words echo other words from Genesis 1. In the beginning... God said, let there be... and there was... And it was good.

God spoke. And a world came into being.

The world is a result of a Word. The world *is* because Someone spoke.

And that Someone, apparently, expects human beings to be able to listen, to understand, to respond. Somehow, at the heart of reality itself, there is speech, words, listening, responding.

Communication is at the very heart of God's nature and purposes in the world.

Evidently God trusts us with words. They are, like all of God's good gifts, meant to be stewarded wisely and humbly, acknowledging our limitations and the possibility of hearing wrongly.

Not used as weapons, not wasted on the addictive noisy clutter that distracts and degrades, not used to bolster power or to manipulate.

No, words, like hands and feet and hearts and minds, are to be subservient to the demands of love.

Because if we take the story of Scripture seriously, we know that whatever else we might think the Word is trying to say to us, love is at the centre of it. Love is what the Word has always been trying to say.

And if love is at the center of how we are seeking to hear and respond to God's voice in our lives, we will rarely go wrong.

Even here, there will be disagreements, of course. The specifics of what love requires in any given moment are not always obvious.

This is why I chose the passage about the vine and the branches. Jesus says to his disciples, "Abide in me, abide in my love." Some translations use the word "remain."

The Greek word that both are translating has a wide and deep range of meanings. It can mean to "accept or act in accordance with." It can mean, "to not depart" or "to continue to be present." It can mean "to last" or "to endure."

All of these communicate something about how we are to orient ourselves to Jesus and to the love he has shown us.

I think of this as kind of marinating in the stories of Jesus, the example of Jesus, the teaching of Jesus, the presence and power of Jesus. When we do this, we come to take on a Jesus-y way of looking at and living in the world.

We don't interpret everything infallibly or automatically know what the right thing to say or do in any given situation might be, but our default setting is ever closer to Christ's voice and Christ's way of being in the world.

For me, the clearest and most personal example of this in my life was when we decided to pursue adoption. Once Naomi and I discovered that biological children were unlikely for us, it took us almost no time to decide that we wanted to adopt as our first choice.

I think this was because we had both been trying, however imperfectly, to see and interpret the world through Jesus-shaped lenses.

Now, I'm not saying that anyone who doesn't pursue adoption is not following the voice of God. Not by any means. Every story is different, and God walks with and speaks to each of us in ways particular to our own circumstances.

But for me, this was the voice of God in my lives.

What we attend to, what we spend our time on, the stories that we give ourselves to shape how we look at the world and which voices we hear.

We can see evidence of this every day in people whose primary narrative that gives their life meaning is this pandemic or the politics around it. Many, many people have spent the last two years marinating in fear and anger and polarization and trying to prove other people wrong.

And gradually they come to see the world as not much more than a stage for this political drama to unfold upon. It becomes the lens through which they see everything.

It matters how we abide.

I want to end by acknowledging that underneath a lot of these more abstract questions in our Faith Questions sermon series, there are often very personal realities.

I know this.

Many of us long for a more direct experience of God. We are well familiar with the silence of God. We would like to hear more.

I get this. I, too, long to hear more directly from God. I, too, would sometimes prefer to see more unambiguous evidence of God's presence and activity in the world.

I have a favourite quote that I keep in a handful of prominent locations so that I am forced to encounter it often. I've probably referred to it before. It comes from the sociologist Peter Berger's *The Heretical Imperative*:

It is not given to [human beings] to make God speak. It is only given to them to live and to think in such a way that, if God's thunder should come, they will not have stopped their ears.

I cannot make God speak. No one can. But I can unstop my ears. I can train myself to be open. I can continue to be present to Jesus. And so can you.

In closing, I hope that we can do two things when it comes to hearing and speaking about the voice of God. .

1. **We should speak more responsibly and humbly when it comes to how we interpret God's voice in our lives.** We can and do mishear. There is no excuse for a Christian to *ever* use the language of "God told me" in an attempt to gain or maintain power or to manipulate other people. We should all become much better at using words like "It seems to me" or "I am convinced that" or "As far as I can tell" when talking about God's voice and God's work in our lives.
2. **We should not give up on the fact that God still speaks.** And that the best way to hear the voice of God is to abide in Christ, to remain in his love, to not depart (even when it's easy), to last to endure. To come to see our lives and the world in Jesus-y ways. To seek to hear his voice above all others.

May God help each one of us to listen well. Amen.

