

“Air God”

John 10:1-10

Series: God is Closer Than You Think Week 4. Listening to the Voice of God

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

January 26, 2025

We began this series – *God is Closer Than You Think* – with a study of Michelangelo’s famous painting of *The Creation of Adam* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. In 2011, that was the culmination of a tour Lisa and I took of the Vatican Museum. Stuffed full of ancient treasures and priceless works of art, the Vatican is, without a doubt, the most crowded museum I ever visited. We booked our tour in advance to skip the long line outside. Yet even inside, the crowds were so thick you could not get close to the artwork. This is why our tour guide gave us headsets called “Whispers.” She spoke into a microphone so we could hear her descriptions of the masterpieces. This was wonderful except for one fact: I like to linger at the works of art. I read the descriptions. I contemplate the piece. I read the description again. I turn my head and look at it sideways or stand back and take it all in. I can’t help it. It’s an illness I’m getting help for. My family hates it. When I exit a museum they are always sitting there rolling their eyes.

In the Vatican Museum my bad habit almost landed me in purgatory. Our guide shepherded us through the dense throng. But I paused to glimpse a Michelangelo statue while she kept walking and talking. And as she walked and talked, her voice in my ear became quieter and quieter. Suddenly I realized I couldn’t hear her. I looked around and discovered I was lost in the huge crowd and separated from the group. I had no idea which way they went. Desperately I listened until the sound in my ear began to grow louder as I returned to the fold.

These days, so many have headphones or Air Pods, I no longer look sideways at someone when they talk to themselves. But what if you had a pair of “Air God” – a way to hear God’s voice? Some doubt it’s possible to pick up God’s voice. Some look sideways at you if you say God speaks to you. Well God *is* speaking to you. Jesus says,

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice. John 10:2-5

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls to you. He wants to guide you through life. The question is not, “Does God speak?” but “What keeps me from hearing His Voice?” According to Jesus – other voices, stranger’s voices. How do we tune them out and turn up the volume on the Lord?

In this series so far we learned of God’s great desire to be with us, our choice to be with Him and the Holy Spirit’s role in making the connection between us. I was on vacation last Sunday morning, feeling perfectly at peace knowing the worship services here were in good hands. Then I received this text from the preacher Scott Burgess:

We have a problem. I have been up half the night in the bathroom. It has not stopped yet. There is no way I can come to church. I will email the sermon to the group. I am so sorry.

That's every pastor's recurring nightmare – it's Sunday morning, the service is starting and you can't get to the pulpit. Except this was real! Thankfully Nathaniel stepped forward and, with only an hour to prepare, took Scott's sermon manuscript, made it his own and did a stellar job of preaching it to you. I want to applaud Nathaniel for saving the day! Now please notice, even though Scott and Nathaniel are two different people with different personal illustrations, they delivered essentially the same message.

Just as two different preachers can deliver essentially the same message, God communicates His message to us in a variety of methods. There are at least seven ways God talks. Why so many? Why doesn't God simply speak audibly to our ears? Well He can and, according to some, He does. Yet the Lord loves variety and diversity. He created 400,000 types of flowering plants, over 8 billion people on earth and billions upon billions of stars in the universe. So when God speaks, it's not surprising for Him to use various ways to get His message to us. There is one Voice and many methods.

Just as all the parts in a choir or orchestra perform the same piece, so God's communication methods are based on the same script: The Holy Scriptures. The Bible is the first of God's seven languages. The Bible is the primary authority. It's the sheet music from which all the voices sing and play. It says in 2 Timothy

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Scripture is the primary way God speaks to us. The flights we took to and from our vacation were based on a Flight Manual. The Bible is the Manual for your flightpath through life. Don't just casually consult the Manual. Devour and digest it so when a crisis comes you will know what God wants you to do. The best way to know if you are hearing the voice of Jesus or a stranger is to check it against the Scripture. Daily devour the Bread of Life. Apply His Word to your flightpath. Are you reading God's Word every day?

This is the first and primary way the Holy Spirit speaks to us. But there are more. And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth. Joel 2:28-30

In this passage we see the Spirit speaking through people, prophesy, dreams, visions, and creation. In his book *Whisper* Mark Batterson lists six ways God speaks in addition to Scripture. He calls them languages. The best way to learn a language is full immersion and practice. The same is true of these languages. It takes time to hear God speak through these. They are Desires, Doors, Dreams, People, Promptings and Pain. Now I know what you are thinking. You're worried this will be a six-point sermon. Well I will cover these quickly and, to make it up to you, I promise next week's sermon will be pointless.

As we look at these six voices there is one crucial principle to keep in mind: they must always sing off the page of Scripture. The way to test if a voice is from God is to see if it points to Jesus Christ who is revealed in the Scriptures. The Apostle John said this from the beginning:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. I John 4:1-3

The same year we visited the Vatican, Lisa and I snagged tickets to the Last Supper – Da Vinci's Last Supper. After several airlocks, you are permitted just fifteen minutes with the painting. Leonardo used this fresco on the wall to make the dining room look deeper as though Jesus is eating with you. He employed one-point perspective to create this 3D effect. All the perspective lines converge on one spot: Jesus. If any of these six voices draw you away from Jesus or lead you to sin or selfishness - that is not God speaking. It may even be the evil one.

It's especially crucial to keep this in mind with the first one: **Desires**. God gives you desires, feelings and emotions. He created them. In the Psalms it says,

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Psalm 37:4

I've often said you should *listen* to your feelings but not be *led* by them. Why? Feelings signal something is wrong. If you feel anger, sadness, longing, depression or fear that's a message something is troubling you. It's good to listen to a feeling and find out why it's there. Yet we get into deeper trouble when we are led by those feelings. If anger leads to aggression, resentment leads to revenge, longing leads to lust, depression leads to despair, fear leads to flight we will compound our problems. Desires can be deceiving. They are tainted and even twisted by sin. They have the inside track. If we allow them, feelings will control our thoughts and will.

When you give these desires to the Lord, you go in a different direction. If you feel angry, work to make things right. If you feel resentment, let go with forgiveness. If you feel depressed, seek God's comfort. If you are gripped with fear, answer it with faith. When you give your desires over to God, you will start to hear Him speak through them.

I meet Christians who believe Jesus will only call them to do a task they dislike. They even feel guilty if they enjoy serving God. If your delight is in the Lord, the Lord will give you the desires of your heart. If you desire to make music He may be calling you to be in the choir or band. If you desire to teach, He may be calling you to lead a Growth Group, Kid's Ministry, Youth Group. If you desire to build, He may be leading you to Habitat or a Mission Trip. If you desire to share your faith, invite someone to Alpha. If you feel weary and exhausted, He's telling you to rest. Yet if your desire directs you to murder, adultery, stealing or lying – you can be sure those are not from God. Use your desires the way God planned.

The next two are **Doors** and **Dreams**. They both appear in a passage from Acts.

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. Acts 16:6-10

Paul and his team tried to turn left and go to Asia but the Holy Spirit closed the door. So he turned right to enter Bithynia but the Spirit shut that door. Finally they reached the coast at Troas and ran out of land. Paul was probably frustrated. He was forbidden to share the Gospel with all those souls. Yet in Troas he received his orders through a dream. God opened the door to a whole new horizon and Paul set sail for the continent of Europe.

Like you, I’ve found myself pounding against a locked door, wondering why God does not open it. At the time it seems so right. Yet God was opening a different door for me. There is no guarantee what’s through that open door will be easy. When Paul and Silas reached Europe they wound up in jail. Yet God even opened that door in a dramatic way. Instead of wrapping your knuckles raw on the door you want, trust God and walk through His door.

Just as Paul had a dream to come to Macedonia, God spoke to many Bible characters through dreams: Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Daniel, Ezekiel, Pilate’s wife, Peter, John. We know a lot more about dreams today. Yet that doesn’t mean God can’t still speak through them. When you have a dream or vision, check it against Scripture.

Next come **People** and **Promptings**. The most frequent way God speaks outside of Scripture is through people. After all, God used people to write the Bible. Many of these are called prophets. The Lord speaks to His people through prophets when they are headed toward disaster. There are modern day prophets like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Billy Graham who call us to follow God’s ways. There are trusted believers in your life who “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) to you. Listen to them. Take seriously what they say. If you’re not sure what they say is from God, always consider the source and check it against Scripture. If the person has a personal agenda, pray about it and get the opinion of another trustworthy believer.

A prompting is an impression or a push to do something. I’ve often been prompted to call, email or visit someone only to discover they are going through a crisis and need to talk. God may be prompting you to sit and listen to a coworker, strike up a friendship with someone at the gym or school, share your faith with another parent while you watch your kids play sports. The important thing about a prompting is to do it. Don’t miss an opportunity. Simeon was told by the Holy Spirit he would not die until he saw the Messiah. After many decades he was quite old and ready for death. Then one day...

Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation. Luke 2:27-30

When the prompting came what if Simeon said, “Aw, I’m just going to hang out in the Jerusalem Starbucks.” He would have missed the Lord. A prompting may lead you to meet Jesus.

Finally, and most difficult of all, **Pain**. In Psalm 69 David cries,
But as for me, afflicted and in pain—may your salvation, God, protect me. I will praise
God’s name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving. Psalm 69:29-30

This is the voice no one wants to hear. Often most of the important life lessons come through failure, defeat and pain. It’s pain that drives a person to seek medical help and change their lifestyle. Pain causes a couple to seek marriage counseling. Pain makes the addict say, “I’m sick of this, I need help.” God rarely sends the pain. Yet He uses the pain to speak to us, to guide us, to draw us to Him. Pain can cause us to curl up in self-pity or lash out in anger. It can imprison us in grumbling or it can be the pathway to a new perspective, a different approach, a better life.

Are you hearing God speak with any of these seven languages now? I can share a recent way God spoke to me. As you know, our amazing Director of Sharing, Sue Harris-Miller felt called to seek a new direction in her life. While continuing as an active disciple at Woodside, Sue announced she would be leaving her position on staff at the end of the year. While I encouraged Sue to follow God’s plan, I was deeply worried about finding a leader for our many missions and ministries. Who would oversee and guide our work with Code Blue, Habitat, Task, the Dinner Ministry, Cast Your Cares, Urban Promise, the Recovery Services and Cafes, multiple Mission trips, Seed and Meal Packing Events, Advent Night, Angel Tree, Special Offerings and more than \$100,000 we give away to missions? Yes we have leaders for each of these missions but who has the faith, the leadership and the organizational skills to continue Sue’s excellent work? I had conversations and email exchanges with two people who expressed interest. But no one was coming to mind and Sue’s departure was fast approaching.

Then something happened which never happens to me. I had a dream. Now I know I dream but I rarely remember them – except for the one where it’s Sunday morning and I can’t get to the pulpit. This time, however, God sent me a clear message. He told me who to ask. This was not someone I previously considered. It seemed to be completely out of the blue. She was a perfect candidate. Yet I thought she would say no. Nevertheless, I felt compelled to follow through on it. I asked this person to apply, fully expecting an instant rejection. Instead, she said, “I’ll consider it.” She explored it, prayed about it and accepted the call.

And so I’m grateful to God to announce that Lisa Gayle will be Woodside’s new Director of Sharing. If you know Lisa you are aware of her deep faith, excellent organizational skills and ability to lead others to accomplish a mission. I believe she is the one God wants to lead our missions and ministries into the future.

Now if only God could give me more dreams like that!