

October 16, 2016

TEXT: Luke 2:41–52

TITLE: Listen to Who's Talking

If this was a church retreat, I'd break you up into small groups of three or four people, have you move your chairs to face one another in small circles, and then I'd have you discuss this question: How does God communicate with us today? If God is a living God, a listening and caring God not just of back then but of right now, how does God communicate with us today? In your small group there might be as many answers as there are people in your group. One might believe that God speaks to us directly, like when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush or Christ spoke to the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. Yes, God spoke directly to Moses and Paul, but honestly those are the exceptions, not the rule. It is simply not practical for 7 billion people to walk over the face of the earth expecting God to be in direct communication with them on a regular basis. God may know us and love us individually, but that is not to say God is going to text message us every five minutes like a Smartphone-addicted teenager.

How does God communicate with us? Does God communicate passively—through beautiful sunsets, through light coming through stained glass windows, through church rituals like baptism and communion, or music that lifts our spirits? Yes, those moments can be encounters with the divine, with what is holy. But that answer alone doesn't fit with what we know about God through the bible. The God of the bible is one who is close at hand and to whom we pray fervently. Psalm 71 said, *In you, O Lord, I take refuge. I have leaned from my birth upon you. Save me; be to me a strong fortress, a rock of refuge.* A fortress is not a sunset. A strong refuge is not a pleasant feeling that settles over us when things are going well and the light hits the church windows just so. If we believe God wants to communicate with us, connect with us, it has to be through some means stronger than a vague New Age spirituality or a passing whiff of holiness sensed on the winds of life.

How does God communicate with us? God speaking to us directly would overwhelm us and take away our free will. God whispering to us indirectly would be inefficient and of little help in times of great need or sorrow. Communication is a multi-layered thing. You communicate through words, body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. Think of the different conversations you have others each day. Now imagine that God is beside you, listening in, inspiring and anxious to communicate through those conversations. It would make you more attentive to what is being said, wouldn't it? So let us remember the wisdom of Matthew 18:20—Jesus said: *Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.* I believe our conversations and interactions with others are how God communicates with us today. God does inspire and guide us individually, but a big part of how God communicates happens when two or three of us talk together.

Now, given the way so many of us speak to one another today, I'm embarrassed that God has to listen to what we say. *Lord, on behalf of all of us, I'm sorry for the tone and content of what passes as political conversation today. Amen.* Let's explore this idea a bit further. Our ability to communicate, listen, and dialogue, is central to how God communicates with us today. Now, if we only talk to people who totally agree with us—read papers that reinforce our own ideas, follow Twitter feeds or Facebook posts that reaffirm what we've always thought – then we're not in true conversation with God and the world. God isn't in the business of rubber-stamping our existing opinions. God sends us out into the world to challenge the common wisdom, to correct the prideful positions of both the right and the left, to speak the truth in love and to listen as others speak truth in love back at us. Think of the important conversations between the prophet Nathan and King David, or when Mordecai told Queen Esther how she had come to palace for such a time as this. If we can't listen and learn from one another, how can we expect God to communicate through our conversations today?

A long time ago when I was growing up, back when there were things like rotary-dial phones and full-service gas stations, there were short films on television called Schoolhouse Rock. These music videos not only taught about multiplication and grammar, they also taught about American history. One of them was about how America was a melting pot—a big ol' pan full of water into which people dived and became one big stew of the United States. I watched that video again recently and although they mentioned countries like Italy, Germany, Holland and France, I can't say that I saw people of color included in the animation of that melting pot. I'm just sayin'... the melting pot image in which our ethnic identity is washed away just isn't accurate. That's why some people choose to compare America to a salad bowl, in which all types of people retain their individuality even as we come together. That's a little better analogy until you pour over the top big ol' servings of white Ranch dressing—as if you're allowing white privilege to drown the mixed salad beneath it. Faithful, Godly communication about life today and the life we hope for tomorrow requires stepping back from privilege and listening to those whose experiences are different from ours.

This has never been more critical than in today's fractured social arena. Earlier this month, although 13 million votes were cast in Columbia, 54,000 "No" votes were enough to kill a peace deal that would have ended a 50-year civil war. In England last June, the entire United Kingdom will likely leave the European Union because of a Brexit vote that succeeded 52% to 48%. The Philippines now has a bombastic, racist President, Rodrigo Duterte, because his 30% of the vote allowed him to claim victory in a 5-person race. If France were to vote today, one of the top candidates wouldn't be from the Socialist party, like President Hollande or the Republican party, like former President Sarkozy, but from the Far Right National Front, led by the extremist Marine Le Pen. And here at home, the vitriol and demeaning rhetoric of this election season won't magically disappear the day

after we vote for President on November 8th. We have to recommit ourselves to talking with one another.

It may seem hopeless, imagining how God can communicate through our conversations and dialogues today. But hold onto to the promise of the bible that says *Where two or three are gathered together, God is in our midst*. Maybe you can't imagine holding a faithful conversation with people whose yard signs are the opposite of yours. But start with whomever God brings right before you in the days ahead—the person behind the cash register, the person next to you on the bus, the person waiting in line beside you. Look for people who don't mirror your reflection—who aren't covered in Ranch dressing, if you get my metaphor. And perhaps take your cue from the gospel lesson on this Children's Sabbath and talk to, learn from, the young people all around us.

During a Passover festival, Jesus got separated from his parents and was later found seated among and conversing with elders in the Jerusalem temple. This incident is not a cute moment in which a precocious young boy is discovered teaching people much older than him. In the Jewish faith, children who are 12 or 13 years old are expected to follow the commandments and be mature in matters of faith. Go to a bar mitzvah ceremony today, and it is common for youths to read scripture and preach on it to a captive audience of their elders. It is one of those rare moments when adults intentionally, attentively listen to a teenager. And in the incident described in Luke's gospel, Jesus was in dialogue with the temple leaders—listening to them, asking questions of them, and teaching them as they also taught him. We can tell ourselves—well, Jesus was the Son of God, so when they were gathered together, two or three or more in the temple long ago, of course God was in their midst just as scripture says. But what if your small group here included a young person? What if you found a moment to ask a teenager, a younger family member, what they thought about the world today—what they hoped for the world tomorrow—how they think about God and justice and reconciliation? What if you really listened to them? Wouldn't that be part of how God is communicating with you today?

God's wisdom is available to people of all ages and experiences—young and old alike. God has long used unusual messengers to get God's message out in the world. That's why it is important to talk to someone who is dealing with a cancer diagnosis, who has close family members with Alzheimer's, who has lost a child through miscarriage or tragedy. Talk and listen to someone who is closer to the horizon of death than you are, who is less-abled than you due to disease, arthritis or chronic pain, who daily experiences some form of verbal sexual abuse, racist prejudice, anti-immigrant bias, gender-identity disdain, or ageism aimed at the young and the elderly. These conversations are not just group-building exercises. These are not shallow one-on-ones designed to smooth over the rough places in daily life. No, this is how God talks to us. Unless we learn the vocabulary of oppression for those who are oppressed, how can we speak of justice? Unless

we listen to stories of struggle and accounts of overcoming adversity, how can we ever proclaim true hope?

God is speaking to us today. Listen to who's talking—to who's crying—to who's praying, "Lord, be my refuge and strong fortress"—those whose silence will only be broken if you hold their hand and say "Tell me about it; I'm listening." Start with the young. Let yourself be amazed at their understanding and their answers that you too may increase in wisdom, in divine and human favor, for all the years of your life.

AMEN