

“Hearing from God”

Introduction: Comedian Lily Tomlin once quipped, “Why is it that when someone speaks to God, they are said to be praying, but when that same person says that God has spoken to them, they are said to be schizophrenic?!” Lying beneath this statement are the following questions: Can we hear from God? Does God speak to us? If so, how does it happen?

I’ll tip my hand early on and say that yes, God does speak to us. God speaks to us through his creation, through other people, and through impressions and emotions and feelings and desires carefully discerned. But the primary way God speaks to us is through his word. By the Spirit through whom God inspired that word, God still speaks in ways that are consistent with his character and that word. What I want to offer to you this morning is one way to come to God’s word that can help us hear from him. And that is by entering, and seeking to find ourselves, in the story. You see, it’s one thing to know the story, but an entirely different thing to enter it. If we can enter it, it can move from being something “out there” to something “in here.” And once the story enters our hearts, we can begin to hear God speak to us and to participate in what he is doing.

John 9 and the account of the healing of the blind man is a great place to do this as there are at least five points of entry for us: the disciples, the neighbors, the Pharisees, the parents, and the blind man himself. So let’s walk through this story a bit and see where we might find ourselves.

I. The Disciples

A. Remember that Jesus and his disciples have just been celebrating the feast of tabernacles in Jerusalem, a harvest festival which also celebrated God’s guiding of his people Israel through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, and which anticipated the coming of God at some future point to put things right with the world. As a part of this celebration there was a lighting ceremony in which four large bowls filled of oil were lit, in Olympic torch-like fashion. In the midst of this spectacular ceremony Jesus boldly and even audaciously declared: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). The entire gospel of John seeks to unpack the full meaning of this statement, but right away, in John 9, we’re given a kind of case study of what this might look like. In fact, one of Jesus’ most frequent miracles was the healing of the blind, likely because it served as a significant metaphor for the spiritual journey.

B. What we see is that right off the bat is that the disciples of Jesus missed the point entirely! Seeing this man who had been blind from birth, they really failed to see *him*. Instead, they immediately began to speculate how his blindness might have occurred. There were only two options, so they thought. Either this man had somehow sinned or his parents had. They desperately, it seems, wanted to come up with a direct cause and effect for this man’s condition, to find some kind of connection between suffering and sin. Jesus, however, wasn’t interested in assigning blame, or engaging in theological and philosophical speculation. It’s not that he thought these kinds of questions and discussions were unimportant; it’s that when they came ahead of showing compassion and caring for the needs of the other that they became problematic. Jesus had come to display the work of God in the world, and display it he did. He broke in to this man’s helpless condition bringing the full power of God to bear on his situation, ministering his grace before anything else.

Might we recognize ourselves in the disciples, those (frighteningly) who were closest to Jesus? If we find ourselves focusing on blame instead of compassion, engaging in theological speculation instead of meeting someone’s desperate need, God just may be trying to speak to us.

II. The Neighbors

A. The man's neighbors had difficulties of their own. They were probably close friends of the man's parents (whom we will meet in a moment), and had no doubt cried with them when they had discovered that their newborn baby boy couldn't see. But now, it seems, they were having difficulty seeing that he could see! In fact, they weren't sure it was actually him, just someone who looked like him? Even when he said it was him they were still confused! These folks, it seems, were having their paradigm challenged. To acknowledge that this boy could now see would mean acknowledging that the universe wasn't a closed system, but that the supernatural, the dimension of heaven, could somehow, miraculously, break in to the dimension of earth. It meant coming to see that there are "thin" places, as the ancients called them, where God breaks through in amazing ways.

Ruth Haley Barton has written that one dimension of the spiritual journey is moving from seeing God nowhere, or seeing God only where we expect to see him, to seeing God everywhere, especially where we least expect him. Might we recognize ourselves in these neighbors of the healed man, being challenged to consider that God could be bigger than our paradigms, and in Jesus, operating in ways in which we least expect it? If so, God might be speaking to us.

III. The Pharisees

A. The neighbors decide the best thing to do would be to bring this man to the Pharisees and let them decide what was really going on. But the Pharisees, too, had issues. These were a group of Jewish religious leaders who strove to uphold a deep piety and the holiness of God through a meticulous observance of the law. They had rubbed shoulders with Jesus before, in another healing that he had done (Jn. 5). That one and this one had both been done on the Sabbath, a violation, they thought of the law of God. But Jesus' claim to be at work just as his heavenly Father was at work, even on the Sabbath, was claiming far more for himself than they wanted to acknowledge. Moreover, Jesus didn't reject Moses, whom the Pharisees linked themselves to. He simply saw himself as the fulfillment of all that God had begun with Moses and the Israelites. Jesus was challenging their place in the system, and the authority and control which they claimed. That had become more important than what God might be doing. When Jesus does bring up the topic of sin, it concerns these folks. They thought they could see, but they were really the blind ones.

If we recognize ourselves in the Pharisees, could it be because we are trying to protect or hold on to something to which we need to let go? Might there be a different way we need to think about doing and being church? Is there something God could be calling us to lose, so that we might find the life that is truly life? If so, God could be speaking to us.

IV. The Parents

A. In the midst of their own ruminating, the Pharisees called in the man's parents. It turned out to be more of a trap than an interview. The parents well knew who their son was, and what had happened to him. But they were operating out of fear, under the very real threat that if they acknowledged Jesus as being behind the whole thing they would be thrown out of the synagogue, losing their place not only of worship, but of the spiritual community that had been their life. So when asked, "Is this your Son, and if so, how can he now see?" they punted. They acknowledged their son, but not Jesus.

If we find ourselves here it might be because we find it easier to belong to and go along with a group, than it is to belong to God. Standing on God's truth might well involve losses, even of perks of some kind. But God might very well be speaking to us that it is far better in the long run to live in and from his truth than the fear of what others might do to us.

V. The Man

A. And then there is the blind man himself. He has been on a remarkable journey, even in

just this chapter! He has definitely been thrown out of the synagogue but he is seeing Jesus as never before, despite the cost. As the chapter has progressed, he has moved from calling Jesus a “man” (v. 11), to acknowledging Jesus as a prophet (v. 17), to understanding that Jesus has “come from God” (v. 33), to believing that Jesus is the long anticipated Son of Man and worshipping him as Lord of all (vv. 35, 38). That’s an incredible journey of increasing spiritual insight! He may have lost his place in the group, but he has found a better place, a better friend, in Jesus.

If you feel drawn to this man, it might be because God has you on a similar kind of journey, beginning to recognize more and more of who Jesus is and the kind of new life that he can bring to you, regardless of what others may think. God could very well be speaking to you about a new and deeper dimension of Jesus than you have ever considered before, inviting you, possibly to jump in with both feet and put your trust in him.

Conclusion: As we watch this drama unfold, where do you find yourself? Where might God be asking you to take a step of compassion, conviction, humility, courage, or faith?

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