



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“What a Mighty Loving God We Serve” 1 Kings 19:1-18; Matthew 17:1-8

I don't know if you agree, but it seems to me that people are not answering their phones as much anymore. At home, they may have answering machines that take a message, or that let them screen their calls, which allows them more freedom to decide when to talk with someone—or not. That can be helpful. And, more people are carrying cell phones and have grown so accustomed to using those that they don't use their land line at all. I think already about 4% of households in the U.S. have “cut the cord”, as they say, and they have no wired phone in their home at all.

Now, I probably get as many sales calls on our home phone as you do—or survey calls. Sales calls can be very annoying, I know. But when I am calling someone, and they don't answer (even though I'm pretty sure they are at home during that time), it makes me feel like they're thinking of me with the same disdain as a sales call, and that is annoying, too. We all want more control of our lives; after all, we pay the phone bill (wireless or not), and we should get to decide how we use OUR phones, right?

And isn't it the same with God? God has been calling your number for years, but most of us are too busy to pick up the phone. Or, if we are paying attention, we may get the sense that it is God “on the line”, and we don't want to pick up, for any number of reasons. I wonder if God feels He's being lumped in with annoying sales calls.

Jesus of Nazareth, the one Christians call Savior and Lord, walked and talked with God constantly. Up until he began his public ministry at about age 30, he had taken years of time--working in the carpenter shop, hanging out with the village elders, sitting in synagogue worship—learning how to connect with God in the middle of the ordinariness of life. He knew he would need that connection with God in order to live the life he wanted.

But what about us?

The board of deacons in another Presbyterian church was being trained on techniques for making church calls. One newly elected deacon was obviously timid about her responsibilities. The pastor hoped to encourage her by stressing the power of prayer. “You'll find it helpful, before you make the call, to spend a few moments talking to God about it,” he said. When the deacons met later that evening to report, the timid one waylaid the pastor and said enthusiastically, “Oh, thank you for what you said about prayer. I tried it when I went out on my call, and it works.” “I'm glad to hear that,” beamed the pastor. “Tell me what happened.” “Well, I prayed the people wouldn't be home, and they weren't.”

Our subject this morning is how God talks to us. Most of us, perhaps long-time church attenders, have received a poor education about prayer--which is simply, talking with God, hanging out with God. In church, we don't model that. What we model is “talking at God”, or

“lecturing poor God with a litany of our needs”—or worse, listening to the minister talk to God. This morning, I want to show you from God’s Word some of the ways God talks to us.

First, let’s start with a Jesus text—from Matthew, chapter 17, verses 1-8. Listen with me for God’s Word to us today, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

This scene, included in all four gospels, shows the Transfiguration of Jesus. With his inner circle, he goes up the mountain. Suddenly, there is this laser light show, and the disciples see Moses and Elijah—the greatest representatives of “The Law” and “The Prophets”. Now here’s the part to grab today: a cloud overshadows them, and God’s voice speaks. I imagine it’s a James Earl Jones-like, deep bass voice, and I imagine it was pretty loud. “This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!” Hearing this voice, the disciples fall down in worship. They KNOW they are in the very presence of God, and that is literally awe-some, to be near such incredible power. And suddenly all shifts back to normal, and they start down the hill with “just Jesus”, who can no longer be “just Jesus” for them.

This is the kind of experience many people believe they must have, if they are to KNOW God is showing up. But it doesn’t have to be that way. God doesn’t want to frighten us. God wants our attention and obedience, in a mutual relationship we can hardly imagine--truly heaven on earth. Our God is a mighty loving God, who “dials down His almighty-ness” in order to connect with us, and not blow us away.

We don’t have to search far in the Bible to see other ways God shows up. We can find angels--sometimes they look like ordinary people. We can find awesome displays of nature—floods and earthquakes. But let’s turn to the old book of First Kings, which is the 12th book from the beginning of our Bibles. In First Kings, find chapter 19. I’m going to read some of Elijah’s story, and it would be helpful if I gave you some background before we jump in.

Elijah is one of God’s great prophets—we just saw that reflected “back” in the Transfiguration scene hundreds of years later, with Jesus. Prophets were most often raised up by God when there was trouble in the governing of the nation. Originally, the nation of Israel had been a theocracy—religion and civic life together. But Israel had clamored for a king who could keep an army ready to beat back threats from surrounding nations. And because of the behavior of the first king (who was named Saul), God had to regularly appoint a prophets to carry God’s word to correct the king. So it went, often uneasily, for generations. By the time of Elijah the prophet, it was king Ahab and his foreign wife Jezebel who were running the country into the ground, and leading the nation to worship pagan gods from Jezebel’s home culture. God sent Elijah to deal with this apostasy spreading among His people.

In the previous chapter, Elijah had a contest with the prophets of the main other god of the area, the fertility god Ba’al. It’s a great story for you to read with the kids (if you don’t mind a load of blood). But for now, suffice it to say Elijah’s God came through, and the God of Gods triumphed magnificently. Elijah and his forces killed all those rival prophets, and word now has reached Queen Jezebel through her husband Ahab. In chapter 19, we pick up this story at this point, where “Jez” wants to “send a message” to Elijah. Listen again for the word of God. *[text]*

Elijah ran for his life. Jezebel was out to kill him, and she was not known to disappoint. Elijah’s flight might be seen as a failure of his faith; but he was not going to ask God to do for him what he could do for himself—get out of there! God meets him on his journey, and supports him with food and rest. Elijah arrives at a cave on Mt. Horeb, and spends the night.

In the early morning, God calls him—“What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah makes his complaint, and God tells him to come out of the cave to meet Him. Notice what happened next. A great wind came up—which was a way a lot of the little gods around Israel were said to show up. But Elijah’s God was not in the wind. Same with the earthquake—even the Psalms mention God makes the earth to shake. But Elijah could tell God was not in the earthquake. Then a forest fire—a symbol of power, and another event people around Israel would have taken for the presence of their god. But, no, again, Elijah could tell his God was not in the first. A fourth phenomenon—nothing dramatic this time, but a gentle whisper. Elijah recognizes this as the voice of God, and he goes to meet with the Almighty. Again he makes his complaint, and God answers him with instructions to anoint several kings and a successor prophet to be the tip of the spear God will use to deliver the nation from the grip of these corrupt rulers. Contrary to Elijah’s “pity party of one”, God reveals he has thousands who have remained faithful even as the nation’s religion was being hijacked by Jezebel. You can tell there will be more confrontations, and you can read the rest of the story, perhaps later today.

What a contrast between these two ways God shows up in the Scripture readings today! Both meetings with the Almighty are “verbal” conversations, true. But one is a dramatic voice no one can miss; the other is the opposite of dramatic—it’s a tiny whisper. I can tell you from my own experience, that is more likely the voice of God, and if we hold out for some light show or some “surround sound 7.1 event”, we will miss God. And God, being God, will move on without you. *Thank You, God, that you give second chances, and more*, but will our response the next time be any different?

Jesus told us to make disciples, and baptize them in the presence of, and with the Name of, the Triune God. Oh, and then he also said to “teach them to obey everything I have commanded you”. That’s “The Great Commission” from Matthew 28. We don’t do the “make disciples or baptize” part all that well. And most churches really stink at the “teach to obey” part. In our desire to emphasize so much the sovereignty of God and the “by grace through faith” conversion to God, we have also communicated that “conversion” is IT. The end. No effort on our part is required. Salvation is reduced to a transaction.

No, that’s the beginning. “Step one” has to be helping new converts know by experience, and regularly bathe in, the presence of Christ that he promised in his last words captured by Matthew. As Paul put it in his letter to his beloved brothers and sisters in the Greek city of Philippi, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” (Philippians 2:12-13, NIV)

These thoughts came to me through the pen of Dallas Willard, a prolific current Christian writer and philosophy professor at USC. This particular book of his has a great title: *The Great O-mission*. Look, he says, at how our churches have omitted bringing new believers into the Christ-life. Our people don’t know Jesus from their rear end (those are my words, not his). We have mal-formed at least three generations of Christians, and the state of the world is kicking our butts with the evidence of how little difference there is between Christians and non-Christians when it comes to divorce or other symptoms of brokenness. Of course the world should be indifferent to the Lord of Life, because apparently we Christians are, too.

We often ask for God’s presence in a quick prayer before a church meeting, if we remember, because that’s what we are supposed to do in church meetings. Then we launch into

our business—OUR business—without really expecting or experiencing the presence of Christ and the tug of the Holy Spirit, speaking God’s voice to us. Wouldn’t most of us have to agree with that?

Job one, step one--our first assignment from Jesus--is to enroll additional students in the Christ life, where the “with-ness” Jesus promised is experienced and expanded to ALL of life (not just some pitiful little “religious” part of life). And—“Mission One” of this congregation is exactly this: making disciples who make disciples. We say it this way: “Glorifying God by Developing Committed Followers of Jesus Christ Who Will Attract Others to Him.”

We churches—and the believers of our churches individually--need to BEG God for forgiveness. Individually, we need to BEG God for guidance and then make extended time in our busy lives. Jesus said the most important things in life are to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” How’s your “love life” with God?

When I first fell in love with a young woman, I was on the phone all the time. In college, when I was paying my own bill, I would cringe when the long distance charges came due, but I would pay the bill. I could not imagine using the phone less often, because I loved the one on the other end. I would take a call from her, anytime. A lot of us have our family’s cell phone numbers programmed to display their name on our screens—or we have set up a special ring tone for each person—so we know this is a call we want to take, no matter when.

But we don’t love God like that, do we? Most of us don’t think it’s possible, or even appropriate. And that’s what our churches have taught. How dare we dismember the delight God wants to give us, and deprive believers of the “with-ness” of the Risen Christ, day by day?!

In my elementary school in Detroit, we used to sing this song: (sing to the tune of “The Eensy Weensy Spider”): “Stop, Look and Listen” by Mary Flynn

D	A7	D
Stop, Look and Listen before you cross the street.		
D	A7	D
First you use your eyes and ears and then you use your feet.		
D	A7	D
The red light always says to "STOP", the green tells you to GO"!		
D	A7	D
The yellow light means "CAREFUL" ~ important things to know!		

We who throw around Jesus’ Name need to stop, look and listen for the still, small voice of God. We have to go to “our cave”—take time for solitude and silence in our world so full of demands and distractions, like Mary who chose to hang out with Jesus rather than sweat in the kitchen, like her sister Martha. Solitude and silence is so radically different that we’ll have to take it in small doses at first. Could you start with 20 minutes, or a half-hour this week? Find a park or open farm land, and walk slowly, sit, “smell the roses”, ask God to speak to you. Even if nothing happens, you will find yourself recharged with a new peace, just by getting away from the din.

Stop, look and listen. Spending time with God changes us. We start loving God—the most important thing, Jesus taught us. In solitude and silence, we can more easily stop, look, and listen—for God, and we can experience the “with-ness” of Master Jesus.

You need that.

Me, too!

INTRO TO COMMUNION

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on September 7, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]