

## **What To Do When You Don't Know What To Do: When You Have to Listen**

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Exodus 3:1-17 (Common English Bible)

*Moses was taking care of the flock for his father-in-law Jethro, Midian's priest. He led his flock out to the edge of the desert, and he came to God's mountain called Horeb. The Lord's messenger appeared to him in a flame of fire in the middle of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was in flames, but it didn't burn up. Then Moses said to himself, Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn't burning up.*

*When the Lord saw that he was coming to look, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!"*

*Moses said, "I'm here."*

*Then the Lord said, "Don't come any closer! Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground." He continued, "I am the God of your father, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God." Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.*

*Then the Lord said, "I've clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I've heard their cry of injustice because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. I've come down to rescue them from the Egyptians in order to take them out of that land and bring them to a good and broad land, a land that's full of milk and honey, a place where the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites all live. Now the Israelites' cries of injustice have reached me. I've seen just how much the Egyptians have oppressed them. So get going. I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."*

*But Moses said to God, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"*

*God said, "I'll be with you. And this will show you that I'm the one who sent you. After you bring the people out of Egypt, you will come back here and worship God on this mountain."*

*But Moses said to God, "If I now come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they are going to ask me, 'What's this God's name?' What am I supposed to say to them?"*

*God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am. So say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you.'" God continued, "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever; this is how all generations will remember me.*

*"Go and get Israel's elders together and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me. The Lord said, "I've been paying close attention to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. I've decided to take you away from the harassment in Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land full of milk and honey."'"*

For probably the last 20 years or so I have suffered with ringing in my ears. It is something that I have gotten used to, although it can be challenging because I cannot experience silence --- when I am in a quiet place --- the ringing seems to get even louder.

While the Tinnitus is annoying, it is not nearly as bad as dealing with hearing loss.

Like many people, my age and of my generation, I suffer from the inability to clearly hear a conversation if there is a lot of ambient noise going on.

Restaurants can be very tricky for me.

I have to focus and really pay attention to the person who is speaking.

It also helps to be able to see their mouth.

I certainly don't lip read but I believe my subconscious does some for me.

Mask wearing has made that very difficult

And yes, I have had my hearing checked.

I know that I miss out on many details when I am in a noisy space and trying to have a conversation. So I do my best to avoid those situations.

I was talking with a friend who has experienced profound hearing lost

He said it is actually easier now that he is almost deaf

Before people would get angry or accuse him of being aloof when he couldn't hear a conversation

he said they have much more grace now.

But it makes me wonder --- how many conversations with God have I missed because I didn't create space to really listen.

Whenever I hear the story of Moses call, I am always reminded of the poem from Elizabeth Barrett Browning

“Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God,  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;  
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”

How often do I miss out on hearing God?

How often do I miss out because I am too busy, or just not paying attention?

When this story takes place in the book of Exodus, we find Moses running away from an accusation that he is a rapist; he is also accused of murdering an Egyptian.

Pharaoh has put a price on him.

Moses has fled to the desert.

He has married a Midianite woman named Zipporah.

He has become a shepherd and has hidden himself in ordinary life.

Moses has no idea that The Pharaoh has died, and it is in this moment that God has come looking for Moses.

When God finds him, he calls to Moses from a bush that is on fire --- but is not consumed.

If you go to St. Catharine's Monastery in the Sinai Peninsula today, you can see a bush that tradition says is the very one that God spoke to Moses out of.

God desires to get Moses' attention to listen.

How does God speak to you?

Are you able to hear God?

I shared last week how God has spoken to me through others.

Sometimes I hear the still small voice of God

Other times I just pluck blackberries.

This story, from the book of Exodus, was collected and finally written down, most likely, during the Babylonian exile.

If you remember in 587 BCE, the Babylonian empire entered Jerusalem, destroying the city, killing King Zedekiah and forcefully removing the elites to Babylon.

The story of Moses becomes important during this time because the Israelite people were struggling with many questions:

- Has God forgotten us?
- Does God still care about us?
- Will God still talk to us?

It is not surprising that they codified this story found in Exodus at this time, for the exact same situation that was taking place during the time of Moses --- when the Israelites were being held captive in Egypt --- was taking place now.

For the ancient Jewish writers --- the story of Moses answers those questions the people were wrestling with:

- Of course, God will not forget us
- God cares deeply about us and is still with us.

In our story, God does not just tell Moses what to do

Instead, God prepares and gives Moses the tools to go back to Egypt

And even when Moses doubted and asked for a sign --- God gave him one.

I love this story because Moses is full of questions and doubts about God.

He argues that he is not the person for the job

He actually gives a laundry list of why God should choose someone else

Yet God is patient and persistent.

God promises to be with Moses while he carries out the task he has been given.

And the result?

Moses continues to listen.

An ongoing conversation with God is developing.

For me, and I imagine many of you --- when God tries speaking to me --- I have to combat all kinds of negative voices that do their best to sabotage the relationship.

Like Moses before us we respond with:

“Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

Why would God want me?

Have you ever said those things, to yourself, when you have been invited to join the choir, serve on a ministry team, teach Sunday School or lead a prayer group or study?

It is almost as if we have to learn how to put on spiritual noise canceling headphones to clear out all the chatter and noise so that we can hear what God is trying to say to us.

Fairly early on during the pandemic I realized --- Its funny even as I say these things, I try to add clutter --- It wasn't that I realized --- I heard God speak to me and say that I needed to do something to take care of me.

Like many of you --- last year at this time was a difficult and challenging moment.

I needed a space where I could wrestle freely with my doubts and questions --- so for the past year I have shown up every Thursday on Zoom --- and a bunch of you have joined me as.

Together we have read provocative or uplifting books and shared together.

Richard Rohr's Falling Upward

We discussed how to tell our story

The Book of Joy

We just finished Brian McLaren's book: Faith after Doubt

And starting Thursday we are reading Nadia Bolz Weber's Shameless

Come join us if you seek a safe space to wrestle with your faith --- we don't tell each other what to believe --- we share how God is shaping us through whatever is going on in our lives.

I am not sure I would have made it through this past year without that group --- like many of you --- life has collapsed on me this past year. I have felt isolated and alone.

Wrestling with all the changes in my parents' life has been overwhelming

Moving them back from Arizona

Preparing and selling the house there

Moving them into a Senior Living Facility

Trying to sell their condo in Illinois

And now my dad's declining health

I could not have done it without my fellow journeyers on Thursday.

This last week was particularly challenging

Cogan's announcement

Speed bumps with the condo sale

Tuesday night I was up all night on the phone with my dad who was going through a rough patch

I was pretty depressed when I joined the zoom call Thursdays

But in that short 30 minutes --- the let me hear the voice of God.

McLaren shared a baccalaureate address that the late Howard Thurman gave in 1980 to Spelman College. He died the following year. It is an address that we all need to listen to or read today more than ever.

In it he challenges us to listen for the sound of the genuine in each of us.

There is in every person something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself. . . . There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. Nobody like you has ever been born and no one like you will ever be born again—you are the only one. And if you miss the sound of the genuine in you, you will be a cripple all the rest of your life. Because you will never be able to get a scent on who you are.

. . .

There are so many noises going on inside of you, so many echoes of all sorts, so many internalizing of the rumble and the traffic, the confusions, the disorders by which your environment is peopled that I wonder if you can get still enough—not quiet enough—still enough to hear rumbling up from your unique and essential idiom the sound of the genuine in you. I don't know if you can. But this is your assignment.

And the crux of the address/sermon is rather simple

If I cannot hear the genuine in me --- I cannot hear it in you

He closes the address with these words:

Now if I hear the sound of the genuine in me and if you hear the sound of the genuine in you it is possible for me to go down in [my spirit] and come up in [your spirit]. So that when I look at myself through your eyes having made that pilgrimage, I see in me what you see in me. [Then] the wall that separates and divides will disappear, and we will become one because of the sound of the genuine makes the same music

. . .

There is in every person that which waits, waits, waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself. There is that in every person that waits—waits and listens—for the sound of the genuine in other people. And when these two sounds come together, this is the music God heard when [God] said, “Let us make [humanity] in our image.

No better words can explain the gift of the Thursday group to me.

They helped me hear and appreciated the sound of the genuine in me.

The sound of the genuine is of course the voice of God breathing into each of us life, and love and hope.

Without judgement

And we find that by LISTENING

What if we were to start believing together that God still speaks and shapes what we’re doing?

What if we were willing to commit as a community to help each other listen to God?

Without judgement --- helping each other to hear the sound of the genuine?

God is calling us --- God is inviting us --- to be intentional about reaching out to those in the world around us:

removing the distractions, even the ones we create ourselves,  
to help one another hear God’s voice.

What can you do to help someone listen to God this week?

The first step of course --- is to listen to the sound of the genuine in our own lives.

Benediction --- comes from Rev. Kathi McShane a UM pastor in California

May God bless you, keep you, be gracious to you.

May God give you the grace never to sell yourself --- or God ---short

Grace to risk something big for something good

Grace to remember the world is now too dangerous for anything but the truth,

And too small for anything but love.

So may God take your mind and think through it.

May God take your lips and speak through them.

May God take your hands and do good with them.

May God take you’re your heart and set it on fire.

