

We have come to our last question in this series – of your questions that you have for God. I was really impressed with the questions. We've covered some really deep and hard topics that we all ask at some point in our lives. We may not get the answer we want or even get an answer in this life, but I hope you keep asking the hard questions. I also hope that you are open to hear God's answers.

Hearing God or experiencing God's presence is hard for us. Someone asked: "Why can't I hear God or feel God's presence?" Someone else asked: "When will I hear God speak to me?" These are valid questions because we've never really been taught how to listen to Christ. We've been taught about Christ, but not necessarily how to interact with Christ. We've heard other people share their experiences of God, and ours pale in comparison. So, we have this notion that God only speaks to us in one way.

Today's scripture shows that not to be true. Matthew describes how three disciples experienced Christ's presence. They had been taught who Jesus is, but the transfiguration story shows us what it was like when they experienced Christ's presence for themselves.

Their experience was a mystical, dramatic experience. Jesus "transfigured" right before their eyes. The word "transfigured" is not one we typically use, but it means: "transformed into something more beautiful or elevated."<sup>1</sup> It's hard to think that Jesus could transform into something more beautiful, but when we experience the divine, it is beyond our expectations.

God is revealed in many different and unexpected ways. When Moses climbed a similar mountain, he experienced God's presence that felt like a consuming fire. In the Psalms, God's presence is described as an earthquake. Matthew describes God's presence as light coming through Jesus and a voice from a cloud, that caused those present to fall on their faces in fear. God's presence can be overwhelming, but not always.

"We need not limit God's revelation to mountaintop experiences and scriptures about miraculous events. God's light shines in the everyday."<sup>2</sup> The beauty of a new baby. A child's laughter and loving embrace. Someone's courage to take a risk for the sake of love or forgiveness. A simple patch of sunlight or a gentle breeze. Hearing God's whisper. Feeling God's nudge. God's subtly is experienced more commonly in the ordinary moments in life than the dramatic, overwhelming experiences that cause us to fall on our faces in fear.

But for some reason, we cling to the mystical experiences and think that God only reaches out to us in a booming voice. When we don't hear that voice, we think that God is not speaking to us. In verse five, we do hear God speak: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" And then the disciples "fell to the ground and were overcome by fear" (v.6). We all say we want to hear God or we worry that we don't hear God, but when God does speak, we are terrified. **God says to listen to Jesus, and when Jesus spoke, he said, "Get up and do not be afraid" (v.7).** When we listen to Jesus, he immediately

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary.com

<sup>2</sup> Steve Garnaas-Homes, "The Light Within," *Disciplines*, 70.

begins comforting us. His loving presence is subtle and calming.

Fear prevents us from truly experiencing God's presence. We're afraid our faith or experience isn't like someone else's, so there must be something wrong with us. We hold on to previous knowledge or traditions like Peter who wanted to build memorials to mark this place as sacred, but God said, just "listen to him." Stay in the moment, this sacred moment, and listen to him.

Because there is a difference between hearing God and listening to Jesus. Hearing is natural occurrence. We even hear while we're sleeping. Hearing is passive. We hear the sounds, but we don't engage. Listening is active. We bring our whole selves into the conversation. We engage and connect to what we experience. Hearing is just with the ears, but listening is with all of our senses and our whole being. Listening is a developed skill that we learn over time.

As I was writing this week, the original question: *Why can't I hear God?*, morphed into *How do we hear God?* I suppose the answer to *Why* is best answered in learning *How*. We think we can't, but we need to learn that we can. We've never really been taught how to hear nor listen to Jesus. Likewise, the question: *When will we hear God speak?* is best answered as *Now*. God is already speaking. We just have to learn how to listen.

*How do we hear God?* First, we have to **let go of preconceived notions of what God sounds like**. Our experience of God is unique. God speaks to how we best hear. It may be through an earthquake or it may be through a whisper. It may be through nature

or it may be through a friend's wise counsel. It may be through both. Be open to however God speaks. Expect that it will be beyond our expectations.

**Stop comparing your experience or faith to others.** God uses our own personal experiences and our own personalities to speak to us. God knows how to uniquely speak to us, so we will listen. It will be different from person to person because we're all different. Even the person who appears to have a strong faith has doubts and sin that they have to deal with, so just focus on your faith and your spiritual experience.

No matter how God speaks to us, it will be mysterious. God doesn't answer questions point blank, but God reveals beauty and grace. Beauty and grace are not hard facts. They are fluid and mysterious. Learn to **trust the mystery**. God may speak through a consuming flame, an earthquake, a beaming light and a cloud, or through children's laughter or a moment of grace. Whether it is dramatic or subtle, it will be mysterious. When we can't easily explain it and it sounds "crazy" when we try, it's God. "Divine revelation is shrouded in mystery."<sup>3</sup> In this scripture, it is in a cloud. We have to learn to trust the mystery.

We also have to **seek God's presence**. We seek God by doing spiritual practices that provide an opportunity or an openness for God to enter. Read the Bible, worship regularly, join a Bible study or prayer group, sing in the choir or play in the band, serve the needy in the community. We cultivate our hearts, so that we recognize God when God shows up. And, when God shows up, God does more than just speak.

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Garnaas-Holmes, 70.

The transfiguration story shows us that God uses more than our ears to speak to us. Before God spoke, the disciples had already seen with their own eyes God's glory. They saw the light when Jesus changed before them. A cloud overshadowed them, so they may have felt the coolness like sitting in the shade. All of the senses were used together to truly experience God's presence, not just hearing God's voice. So, **use all of your senses**, when seeking God's presence. Focusing only on hearing God limits our experience.

Jesus is a living and loving presence. The disciples on the mountain experienced it. We can experience it. If we open ourselves to allow Jesus to speak to us and be present with us, he will. When we set aside our expectations and let Jesus come to us in a new way or different ways, Jesus will come. In the dramatic moments and in the subtle moments, Jesus is there. Listen to him. May his loving presence calm us and comfort us. Amen.