

IS THAT YOU, GOD?
Selections from Psalms & Proverbs
Crossroads/La Paz, Mexico/Pastor Joyce Anderson-Reed
October 5, 2008

You're at a major crossroads in your life. At least two--maybe three, four or even five—options are laid out before you. Which one should you choose?

You're at a crossroads in a relationship. Deeper intimacy is always a risk. Can you trust this person with more of your heart? What should you do?

You're at a crossroads in your career. If you stay in your present job you have a regular paycheck, benefits, and predictability. If you decide to try something else, well—in our present economy—who knows what could happen next. Is it worth the risk?

You're at a crossroads in your faith. You're tired of the rut you find yourself in . . . always relying on the same tired religious phrases and rote memorized prayers. You want to meet this God who shows up in burning bushes, who gives young shepherd boys the courage to face giants. Where do you begin to look?

Are you seeking direction in your life?

Looking for answers?

Wondering what to do next?

Perhaps the better question is: Who isn't?

If we don't have an unanswered question in our life, then we're probably not being honest with ourselves.

But how do we discern the “right” answer?

Those of us who choose to walk in relationship with God, are hopefully seeking God's voice to direct our footsteps in lieu of the world's voice.

But how does one hear God's voice? What does God's voice sound like?

In Christian communities you might hear things like, “If you want to find God, then read your Bible. Pray. Go to church.” And all of these are worthy endeavors. God can and will speak to you through his written word the Bible. God will come to you as you

spend time in prayer. God does meet us when we gather in community to praise and worship his name.

But again, how do you know when it's God's speaking and not just your own voice in your head telling you what you want to hear?

Answering that question is what I'm going to attempt over the next several weeks. Through Scripture and Story I hope to help you get a better grasp on what it means to hear and to listen to God's voice. But remember, as with all aspects of faith, God doesn't hand out formulas, or pre-packaged answers to our questions in life. The expression that "Life is a journey, not a destination" rings true when your life is wrapped around God.

Faith journeys always have pieces that are unfathomable, mysterious, and at first glance seem like they belong to someone else's puzzle box. But just because you can't see clearly the picture on the box, doesn't mean that all the pieces don't belong to you.

So, probably the first step in recognizing God's voice is asking yourself this question: Do I even believe God talks to me?

I mean, if you go around thinking "Why would God even bother talking to me? He's certainly got bigger problems than mine to pay attention to," or "I've got it all figured out. I'll try God when I get really stuck." Then God might be more of a fuzzy connection in your life and having a hard time getting through. God might be walking around like the man in the Verizon Commercial saying, "Can you hear me now? Can you hear me *now*?"

The movie *Finding Neverland* is based on the true story of playwright J. M. Barrie (played by Johnny Depp) during the summer he wrote *Peter Pan*. That summer Barrie spent time playing imaginative games with four young boys going through a series of family crises, and this helped him to imagine the story about a boy who never grows up.

In one scene of the movie, Barrie is walking with his large dog in the park and has just met the four boys and their mother. The oldest boy asks what Barrie does for a living, and he answers by saying, playfully: "Well, currently, I make my living entertaining princes and their courts with my trained bear, Porthos. If you command your brother Peter to join us, I am willing to give you just such a performance." (Peter has not been playing with his brothers because he is still unable to process their father's death.)

The other boys agree. Barrie sets himself up with his dog in front of the seated family. He faces his dog and says: "I want you to pay particular attention to the teeth. Some unscrupulous trainers will show you a bear whose teeth have all been pulled, while other cowards will force the brute into a muzzle. Only the true master would attempt these tricks without either measure of safety."

Five-year-old Peter is not in the mood to play. Leaning toward his mother, he defiantly says: "Why did you bring me over here for? This is absurd. It's just a dog."

Barrie, who was walking back to Porthos, suddenly turns around. "Just a dog?" he asks. "Just? Porthos dreams of being a bear, and you want to dash those dreams by saying he's 'just a dog'? What a horrible, candle-snuffing word. That's like saying, 'He can't climb that mountain; he's just a man.' Or, 'That's not a diamond; it's just a rock.'" Before turning back to the dog, Barrie gives the boy an appraising look and mutters, "Just."

Peter retorts, skeptically: "Fine then. Turn him into a bear, if you can."

Unfazed, Barrie replies: "With those eyes, my bonny lad, I'm afraid you'd never see it." (*Finding Neverland* (Miramax Films, 2004), directed by Marc Forster)

Are you looking for God to show up in your life? Are you expecting to hear his voice? Because otherwise, like young Peter, you might be blind to what's right in front of you.

Proverbs 8:17 says:

I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me.

And Jeremiah 29:13:

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

For the Jewish people, your heart was the center of who you were. It was more than a place to process emotions. Your intellectual, spiritual and emotional well-being were all tied to your heart. That's why there are so many Bible verses about the purity of your heart, or the expression "desiring after God's own heart."

I believe that one of the ways God speaks to us is in the quiet, truth-centered places of our hearts. The core of who we really are. Have you ever heard God speak to you in the quiet places of your heart? Let me illustrate with this story by Erwin McManus. He says:

My son, Aaron, was five or six when he began asking me, "What does God's voice sound like?" I didn't know how to answer.

A few years later, Aaron went off to his first junior high camp. In the middle of the week, I went up with another pastor to see our kids. Aaron, I learned, had started to assault another kid but had been held back by his friends. He was unrepentant, wanted to leave camp, pulled together his stuff, and shoved it into the car.

I asked him for a last talk with me before we drove away. We sat on two large rocks in the middle of the woods. "Aaron," I asked, "is there any voice inside you telling you what you should do?"

"Yes," he nodded.

"What's the voice telling you?"

"That I should stay and work it out."

"Can you identify that voice?"

"Yes," he said immediately, "It's God." It was the moment I'd waited for.

"Aaron," I said, "do you realize what just happened? You heard God's voice. He spoke to you from within your soul. Forget everything else that's happened. God spoke to you, and you were able to recognize him."

I will never forget Aaron's dug-in response: "Well, I'm still not doing what God said."

I explained to him that that was his choice, but this is what would happen. If he rejected the voice of God coming from deep within and chose to disobey his guidance, his heart would become hardened, and his ears would become dull.

If he continued on this path, there would be a day when he would never again hear the voice of God. There would come a day when he would deny that God even speaks or has ever spoken to him.

But if he treasures God's voice however it comes to him—through the Scriptures, through his conscience—and responds to him with obedience, then his heart would be softened, and his ears would always be able to hear the whisper of God into his soul.

Aaron chose to stay, I'm grateful to say. If he had chosen differently, he would have begun the path toward nominal discipleship. Perhaps he never would have rejected the faith overtly. He might have even chosen to be a faithful attender at a church and been by everyone else's estimation a good man, but he would no longer be a close Jesus-follower. (Adapted from Erwin McManus, *The Barbarian Way* (Thomas Nelson, 2005), pp. 87-89, for the October 30-31 entries of *Men of Integrity*, September/October 2008.)

Children are usually way better at recognizing God's voice than we are as adults. They have fewer filters in place to screen God out. Have you ever had a conversation with a child about God? It's fascinating. It's a no-holds-barred conversation. Nothing is off limits. No question too stupid or too grandiose to venture.

Isn't it interesting that the boy in the story, Aaron, knew immediately that it was God speaking to him? He didn't say it was his conscience, or his parent's voice telling him what to do. He identified the voice as God.

Not that he wanted to listen to God's voice. I'm sure many of us can identify with him in that moment of rebellion! But it was in that rebellious moment, that his earthly father gave him sage wisdom: his dad told him that if he refused to listen to that voice, then his heart would become hardened and his ears dull.

Proverbs 4:23-27 says this:

**20 My son, pay attention to what I say;
listen closely to my words.**

**21 Do not let them out of your sight,
keep them within your heart;**

**22 for they are life to those who find them
and health to a man's whole body.**

**23 Above all else, guard your heart,
for it is the wellspring of life.**

**24 Put away perversity from your mouth;
keep corrupt talk far from your lips.**

**25 Let your eyes look straight ahead,
fix your gaze directly before you.**

**26 Make level paths for your feet
and take only ways that are firm.**

**27 Do not swerve to the right or the left;
keep your foot from evil.**

Aaron's father was teaching him to guard his heart, the wellspring of his life. He cautioned him that by listening to God's voice he would find level paths to guide his footsteps. A path that would keep him from evil.

Do you have trouble hearing God's voice because your heart is hard and dull? How many times has God spoken to the quiet places of your soul, told you exactly what direction, what action to take next, and you chose to ignore that voice? You chose to go your own way instead?

Maybe hearing God's voice more clearly involves chipping away some of the bitterness, the rebellion, the anger, the stubbornness, and the pride that is creating a sound barrier between you and the creator of the Universe?

Let me say that again because I'm sure some of you immediately tried to block that out!

Maybe hearing God's voice more clearly involves chipping away some of the bitterness, the rebellion, the anger, the stubbornness, and the pride that is creating a sound barrier between you and the creator of the Universe?

I don't know the condition of your heart. Only you and God do. But I can tell you from my own personal experience that when I have the courage to sweep away the garbage I've let build up around my heart, I have a much easier time recognizing God's voice when he speaks.

In addition to God coming as the still, small voice within, I also believe God can speak to us through the wise counsel of trusted, God-fearing friends.

Proverbs 13:10 & 20 says this:

Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice. (10)

He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm. (20)

In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer, a Quaker, tells the story of how God used Palmer's friends to shape his vocational path in a significant way. Palmer had been offered the opportunity to become the president of a small educational institution. He was certain the job was for him, but he honored the tradition of the Quaker community, which is to call on a dozen trusted friends to engage in a "clearness committee," a process in which "the group refrains from giving you advice but spends three hours asking you honest, open questions to help you discover your own inner truth."

Palmer writes that the initial questions were all very easy, until someone simply asked, "What would you like most about being a president?" He writes:

The simplicity of that question loosed me from my head and lowered me into my heart. I remember pondering for at least a full minute before I could respond. Then, very softly and tentatively, I started to speak:

"Well, I would not like having to give up my writing and my teaching.... I would not like the politics of the presidency, never knowing who your real friends are.... I would not like having to glad-hand people I do not respect simply because they have money.... I would not..."

Gently but firmly, the person who had posed the question interrupted me: "May I remind you that I asked what you would most *like*?"

I responded impatiently, "Yes, yes, I'm working my way toward an answer." Then I resumed my sullen but honest litany. ...

Once again the questioner called me back to the original question. But this time I felt compelled to give the only honest answer I possessed, an answer that came from the very bottom of my barrel, an answer that appalled even me as I spoke it.

"Well," I said, in the smallest voice I possess, "I guess what I'd like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word *president* under it."

I was sitting with seasoned Quakers who knew that though my answer was laughable, my mortal soul was clearly at stake! They did not laugh at all but went into a long and serious silence—a silence in which I could only sweat and inwardly groan.

Finally my questioner broke the silence with a question that cracked all of us up—and cracked me open: "Parker," he said, "can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?"

By then it was obvious, even to me, that my desire to be president had much more to do with my ego than with the ecology of my life—so obvious that when the clearness committee ended, I called the school and withdrew my name from consideration. Had I taken that job, it would have been very bad for me and a disaster for the school. (Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), pp. 45-46)

Do you have trusted God-fearing friends that will ask you the hard questions? The questions that lower you from your head to your heart? The questions that push past your ego? The questions that make you grapple with God?

Because God talks to you through these types of conversations. One penetrating God-question can pierce straight through the protective armor it's taken you years to construct.

If you've tried listening to God on your own and don't find yourself getting very far, then perhaps you need the courage to trust a brother or sister in Christ that will hold you accountable. Not someone who will examine you like a smear on a microscope slide. Not someone who will make you squirm and sweat needlessly. No, a person that is full of God's love. Someone who loves and respects you . . . so much that he or she isn't afraid to ask you a question that you so desperately need to hear . . . so much that this person won't snap back or run away if you lash out at them in response . . . so much that this person wants you to find the wellspring of your life and won't give up on you until you do.

Finally, in addition to hearing God in the quiet of your heart, or through the trusted counsel of Christian friends, I'd also add that sometimes God doesn't speak or give further instructions until you take a leap of faith.

What do I mean? You're at one of those crossroads of life, and you're leaning towards a particular direction. It seems like the right thing to do, the right choice, but you still have some doubts, some hesitation. Should I, or shouldn't I? You play around with a lot of "what ifs" in your head. But then, you decide to act. You decide to take a risk and believe that this is what God wants you to do. And once you take the risk, God gives you a sign that it was the right choice. But the sign only comes after you step out in faith with God.

As Del Tackett challenged us in the DVD series *The Truth Project*, "Do you really believe that what you believe is *really* real?"

I call them God Dares.

Mike Batterson says, “In my experience, signs follow decisions. The way you overcome spiritual inertia and produce spiritual momentum is by making tough decisions. And the tougher the decision, the more potential momentum it will produce. The primary reason most of us don't see God moving is simply because we aren't moving. If you want to see God move, you need to make a move!

I learned this lesson in dramatic fashion during the first year at National Community Church. We had been praying for a drummer to join our worship team for months, but I felt like I needed to put some feet on my faith, so I went out and bought a four-hundred-dollar drum set. It was a *Field of Dreams* moment: if you buy it, they will come. I bought the drum set on a Thursday. Our first drummer showed up the next Sunday. And he was good. He was actually part of the United States Marine Drum and Bugle Corps.

Rock and roll.

I cannot promise that signs will follow your faith in three minutes or three hours or three days. But when you take a step of faith, signs will follow. God will sanctify your expectations, and you will begin to live your life with holy anticipation. You won't be able to wait to see what God is going to do next. (Mark Batterson, *Wild Goose Chase* (Multnomah, 2008), pp. 32-33)

Psalm 37:4-6 says:

**4 Delight yourself in the LORD
and he will give you the desires of your heart.**

**5 Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him and he will do this:**

**6 He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn,
the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.**

Is God waiting for you to risk?

Maybe God's done talking to you for now? Maybe God's said all he needs to say?
Maybe God is waiting for you to put your faith into action?

And when you do that . . . then the next sign will come.

Terry Lane, a successful cabinet maker in Jacksonville, Florida, was challenged by God to take a risk. This is his story:

My business had prospered to the point my 40-man staff needed more space to produce the quality cabinets for which Mid-Lane was well known. We found an ideal location in northwest Jacksonville and in 1985 built a 25,000 square foot state-of-the-art plant that was soon humming with activity. Life was good. But my peace and comfort were short lived.

Almost immediately, problems erupted. Every night the burglar alarm sounded, and I was summoned to the plant by police officers. Broken windows, shots fired, bullet holes in the walls, stolen equipment, vandalism—even incinerated cars in the parking lot.

One night an officer asked me, "What possessed you to build a plant this close to 'The Rock'?"

"What do you mean, 'The Rock'?" I asked.

"The Cleveland Arms apartments," he responded. "More crack cocaine is sold here than anywhere in Jacksonville, so we call it 'The Rock.'"

And he proceeded to enlighten me about my new neighborhood. The 200-unit subsidized housing complex was occupied by drug dealers, prostitutes, and felons, a place considered so dangerous police were hesitant to go there.

As I sat mulling over the situation, from out of nowhere came a thought so clear it was almost audible: *If you'll love those who despitefully use you, I'll take care of it.* Stunned and shaken by God's admonition, I wondered how I'd obey this gentle command. Then I sensed him say, *Forget about all the shooting and all the garbage. Look at the children.*

Days went by as I prayed for my neighbors and tried to figure out how to connect with this community. I bought several basketballs, wrote "Jesus loves you" and "Mr. Lane loves you" on them, and threw them over the fence into the complex. There was no immediate reaction, but at least they didn't throw them back.

Then one Saturday while working alone, I stepped outside for a break. I heard the noise of children playing beneath a tractor trailer parked on the property. When they saw me, one said, "There's the man," and they started running.

"Wait," I called. "Would you like something cold to drink?" Four or five little kids followed me into the plant where I opened the soft drink machine and gave them a cold soda pop. They went home, and I thought no more about it. Until Monday afternoon when I heard a commotion in the lobby and the receptionist ask, "Can I help you?"

As I walked down the hallway, I heard one little kid ask, "Where's the big man with the beard?" Turning the corner, I saw 16 kids in the lobby looking for me—well, for the man with the key to the drink machine.

That was the beginning. Suddenly, 35 children adopted me, coming to my office every afternoon after school instead of going home. There was nothing for them to go home to. Day after day, while I worked at my drafting table, I was surrounded by kids on the floor busily coloring or doing other crafts I had brought.

Thus began the journey that would change my world and that of many kids whose addicted parents left them to fend for themselves. Often hungry, unkempt, undisciplined, with no structure in their lives or motivation to attend school or church, these children would be the next lost generation. I felt compelled to do what I could. Years flew by, and the kids I mentored became a part of my life.”

Ten years after Terry first reached out to the kids of "The Rock," he sold his share of the cabinetmaking business to his partner and started Metro Inner City Sunday School. When the kids got older, they started youth groups and teen programs. It wasn't long before Terry asked the owner of Cleveland Arms to give him an apartment.

In five-years' time, Lane established a community center called Metro Kids Konnection where the staff feeds over 145 children physically, academically, and spiritually.

Today Terry says:

“There is so much to do, but I'm excited and grateful for the direction God chose for me. My wife and I have gone from enjoying a six-figure annual income to subsisting on \$12,000 a year, but God faithfully meets every need. And the rewards are incomparable. Nothing can replace the joy of having a little child crawl into my lap with a hug for "Pastor Terry," or for a young man who has been rescued from a potential life of dealing drugs to look me in the eye, shake my hand with a firm grip, and say, "Thanks, P.T." That's my reward for listening to God when he said: "Look at the children." (Terry Lane (as told to Shirley Shaw), "Look at the Children!" Today's Christian (September/October 2007); Brian Lowery, associate editor, PreachingToday.com)

Are you seeking direction in your life?

Looking for answers?

Wondering what to do next?

Are you trying to hear God's voice in the midst of the struggle?

Then try this:

1. Soften your heart, unclog your ears, and listen to the still, quiet voice that speaks to the deepest place of your soul.
2. Seek out a trusted Christian friend who will ask you tough questions.
3. Risk a step of faith to create momentum in your life.

Next week I'm going to continue addressing how God speaks to us by looking at dreams, and how God speaks to us through our dreams.

Let's pray.