

Homily.2OrdB  
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St. Bernard Church, Tulsa  
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## HOW WE HEAR GOD'S VOICE

What is the **most obvious** question raised by the Bible that **no one** ever asks?  
Now you don't have to be a Bible scholar to know the answer to this.

The question is clearly raised in the First Reading today from the Book of Samuel.

Here are some clues.

We know from the Bible that God talked to Adam. He talked to Moses. He talked to Abraham.

He talked to Elijah.

In today's First Reading, God calls out to Samuel. Not once but three times. Samuel heard him each time and responded.

He talked to all of the prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and so on. They're called prophets because they heard from God and passed God's messages on to the Jewish people and now to us.

When Jesus was on earth, He called people, just like He did to Simon and Andrew in today's Gospel.

After Jesus ascended into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit as His primary means of communicating to His followers. So, in the Acts of the Apostles, which describe the events that took place in the earliest Christian community, the Bible says, "The Holy Spirit said to Peter," "The Holy Spirit said to Phillip," and the "Holy Spirit said to the community at Antioch," to give a few examples.

The Bible is filled from beginning to end with examples of God and the Holy Spirit talking to human beings. But it never says HOW.

How did this communication take place? Did these people in the Bible that heard from God, did they actually hear a voice? Or did words just somehow pop into their heads without an actual voice, and they believed they came from God?

I've been a Catholic for a really long time, and I have never heard this talked about.

There is no simple way to describe the specific means God uses to communicate with us. The starting point, however, is for each one of us to really believe that God is communicating to us, just like He did with so many in the Bible.

The goal would then be for each of us to be attentive to all that is happening in our lives, random thoughts, dreams, events, things people say, passages in the Bible, and so on, all the time wondering and asking, "God, is that You?" The great spiritual writer, Thomas Merton, wrote that this process of always being attentive leads to the "awakening, enlightenment and amazing grasp by which we gain awareness of God's creative and dynamic intervention in our daily life."

He added : "For just as the wind carries thousands of... seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in our minds and wills. Most of these seeds perish and are lost, because we are not prepared to receive them..."

An expert in the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola put it this way: "God is an active God. He is ever at work in people's lives, inviting, directing, guiding, proposing, suggesting....So, the trick is to figure out which of our inner desires, thoughts, and feelings are from God, and which are not."

It's complicated to figure out what comes to us from God and what doesn't. It's not an easy process. God does not always make His messages to us crystal clear. This is intentional on His part. He wants us to grow in our trust and to reach out in faith, even though we would like to know more about what He reveals to us.

I do want to talk about one aspect of spiritual discernment, and that is the role of silence. An important principle of discerning God's communication is that silence magnifies God's voice. A priest friend of mine who has spent a lot of time in Rome reports that there is a church in Rome on which can be found the following inscription, in Latin: "Silence is the mother of prayer."

Maintaining silence like this takes practice. It requires that we learn to shift our mentality away from doing, from achieving, to simply being, to empty our mind so that it is completely open to what God wants to communicate to us.

In Luke 5:15-16, we read: "The report about Jesus spread all the more, and great crowds assembled to listen to him and to be cured of their ailments, but he would withdraw to deserted places to pray."

A few examples of how this works might help.

I've been helping a young man whose wife passed away suddenly last year. He's not religious, isn't sure whether God exists or not. But he thinks about faith and heaven, even though he's skeptical, and we talk about these things a lot. He has many quiet moments now when he reflects on the most important things in life.

Last week, he said an interesting thing had happened to him. He had gotten the impulse to call his uncle, a man he rarely talks to. He dismissed the idea at first. He couldn't think of a good reason for calling his uncle. But it kept nagging him. So he called.

When his uncle answered the phone, my friend could tell he was very emotional. He asked his uncle why he was upset. The uncle told him, "This is the anniversary of my wife's death. I'm so grateful you called."

This is so often how it works. An idea comes to us. We think it was just a stray thought and are tempted to ignore it. Well, maybe God planted that idea in our head. And if He did, when we go with it, when we follow up, God links what we do or say with what someone else is doing or with something they need.

For me, personally, I have a tendency to wake up in the middle of the night, around 2:30 or 3:00. I now think of these situations as mini-retreats. Ideas, inspirations, directions come to me during these early morning hours, kind of like the experience of Samuel in the First Reading.

So I'm grateful for the guidance I receive, but I have to admit I'm also anxious to get back to sleep. I often say to God, "You know, we could do this during office hours." God must figure that I'm a better listener at 3 in the morning, when it's completely quiet.

A wonderful goal for all of us as we begin this New Year would be to become better listeners for the voice of God. How great it would be to experience His active guidance in our lives and to respond by saying, like Samuel, "Here I am. You called me."