

## SERMON – 01/06/08

### TOUGH QUESTION #4 – “How can I hear God’s voice?”

This past Christmas Eve we put yellow 3x5 index cards into the worship bulletins and asked people to write down up to 3 pressing questions they had about God, Faith, & Bible.

- Over 100 people responded... and during my vacation on the Big Island I compiled those questions to form the basis of this month’s sermon series... TACKLING THE TOUGH QUESTIONS.
  - So each week over the next four weeks or so I’ll be addressing one of the top 4 questions that were raised by you folks!
  - Two questions were far and away the most requested... you’ll have to be here towards the end of January to for those!
  - The other two that made it in the top 4 had a significant level of inquiry as well.
- However, there were some questions that were “oh-so-close” to making the top four. Those included...
  - “How does Christianity fit in with the other religions of the world (What role does tolerance play?)?”
  - Why is forgiveness so hard (& how do I better understand/receive grace?)?
  - “What will the end of time (judgment day) be like?”
  - “How does the Bible relate to modern-day Science?”
- Unfortunately, we’re not going to get to those questions this time ... we’ll have our hands full with just the “top 4”!
  - But as I compiled the questions, there were 4 other categories that caught my attention... so I’d like to share some of those at the beginning of each of these 4 weeks of sermons.
  - We’ll start with a Christmas Question...
  - “What is the actual translation of the Hebrew word used to describe Mary’s state? Is it literally ‘virgin’ or something else?”

- In the gospel of Luke, the word literally is “virgin.” However, Isaiah 7:14 says this, “Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Look, the **young woman** is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”
- The word “young woman” in Hebrew is elsewhere translated “girl” or “maiden”... but in the NT, they use the Greek word for ‘virgin!’
- Now for a **Quick-Answer Question**:
- *“Why is it that sometimes Jesus appears on the cross & sometimes he doesn’t?”*
- A cross with Jesus on it is often called a ‘crucifix.’ It reminds us of the sacrifice & suffering that Jesus endured for our sake. A cross without Jesus can remind us of the resurrection & the new life God gives to all because of Jesus!
- Now for a **FUN Question**:
- *“Who was Cain’s wife?”*
- If you remember, the Bible lists Adam & Eve as the first humans... they had two sons, Cain & Abel. Cain ended up killing his brother... but later goes on to have a family of his own.
- So the question is, if they were literally the “first family,” who did Cain marry?
- Well, I don’t know. However, it could very well be a story that teaches truth about God & humankind... rather than a newspaper-like reporting of what actually happened.
- Okay, one more set of questions... I call these **GOOD QUESTION Questions**:
- *Why do football players pray for God to let their team win, and not the other team? AND... What happened to Jesus between birth & age 12?*
- Good questions! I don’t think God is as concerned about football as we are... and the Bible doesn’t say what happened to Jesus between those years!

Now, let’s get down to the nitty-gritty... **TOUGH QUESTION #4**... “How do I know when I’m hearing God speak?”

- The Bible seems to be full of instances where God spoke to human beings in clear, audible voices... in a variety of circumstances... for example:
  - God speaks to Noah, asking him to build an ark...
  - God speaks to Moses through a burning bush...

- God speaks to Samuel as a young boy, while he's sleeping in the temple...
- God speaks to the young prophet Jeremiah that he has been known by God since he was in the womb...
- God speaks to Jonah, telling him to go and preach to the wicked people of Nineveh...
- In the book of Acts, God shows Peter a divine vision during his prayer time... and Saul becomes Paul when he's blinded on the road to Damascus, and Jesus speaks to him personally!
- Fast-forward to present day... and it's not uncommon to hear pastors, church leaders, and even ordinary Christians profess quite openly: "God told me this or God told me that..."
  - In fact, is there a person here today who hasn't heard someone, somewhere say, "God told me \_\_\_\_\_"?
  - I didn't think so.
  - So if God's voice is so easy to hear... how come not everyone hears it?
  - Or how come we don't hear it all the time?
  - Or how come we don't hear it clearly?
  - *(pause)* Good question. Tough question.

If you search the internet... or browse through Borders... you'll come across quite a few books that deal with the subject of hearing God speak. It sure does seem to be a common occurrence.

- One such book I even found on my own bookshelf... in my "to read" stack...
  - It's a book by Brad Jersak, entitled *CAN YOU HEAR ME? Tuning in to the God who speaks*.
  - I took the occasion to read it this past week... and among the pages I found this helpful insight...
  - Jersak comments that the Bible testifies & models how God's voice may be heard through at least 3 broad avenues:
  - First, through **Messengers...** authors, teachers, preachers, prophets, musicians, testimonies, angels, children, & the occasional donkey or shrubbery (especially if your name is Balaam or Moses!)

- Second, through **Life Circumstances**... whether it be by way of “coincidences” (or ‘God-incidents’), symbols, or real-life parables (aka ‘divine teaching moments’)... God uses events in our life to communicate messages.
- And third, through **Direct Messages to our Hearts**... both by hearing thoughts & words in our mind... from insights for our own lives, to ‘divine nudges’ for others... and at times we’re also able to sense God’s presence.
- As the author of the classic medieval book *The Cloud of Unknowing* writes that there are times when we have an acute “awareness of God, known and loved at the core of our being”.
- Having said that, I don’t think it’s being unfaithful to have a certain amount of inherent skepticism whenever someone says, “God told me (such and such).”
  - So how do we know which divine revelations are true?
  - How do we know when we’ve had what might be a divine insight – rather than simply something our own hearts or minds want to hear?
  - In his book, *Who Speaks for God*, author Jim Wallis writes this:
  - “Is there a reliable guide to when we are really hearing the voice of God, or just a self interested or even quite ungodly voice in the language of heaven? I think there is. Who speaks for God? When the voice of God is invoked on behalf of those who have no voice, it is time to listen. But when the name of God is used to benefit the interests of those who are speaking, it is time to be very careful... Virtually every religiously based social movement of great historical significance has been on behalf of others. Slaves, women, children, oppressed peoples, racial minorities, exploited workers, political prisoners, refugees, disenfranchised populations, persecuted believers, and victims of war have all been the subjects of religiously & morally inspired social movements.”
  - I think I agree, somewhat... a message on behalf of those who have very little voice or power is indeed one way to test whether something is of God...
  - But we have to have more to go on, don’t you think?
- In our gospel reading for today from the book of John, we are reminded this...
  - “*The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by*

*name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” (John 10:2-4)*

- We, as God’s sheep, follow because we know the Shepherd’s voice!
- Have you ever had your phone ring... and before the person on the other end identified him/herself, you knew exactly who it was by the sound of their voice (caller ID doesn’t count!)?
- That’s what God wants it to be like with us as God’s children!
- But here’s the key... when it comes to hearing God’s voice, it’s not a SOUND that we’re listening to... like a deep, James-Earl-Jones kind of voice...
  - Instead, it’s God’s HEART that we listen to!
  - And how do we come to know God’s heart?
  - Through the Bible! Through reading God’s word.
  - (Oh no, Pastor Jim... now you’re going to make me feel guilty for not reading my Bible every day. I didn’t come to church to feel guilty today!)
  - Trust me... I’m not trying to make you feel guilty... (then again, maybe that’s God’s Spirit trying to speak to your heart!)
- I do believe, more than anything else, however... that we come to know & recognize God’s voice by becoming familiar with the Bible!
  - (But I don’t know the Bible, Pastor Jim... there’s no way I can possibly come to know everything there is in the Bible, it’s too big & too confusing!)
  - Okay... slow down... take a deep breath...
  - The first thing we need to do when approaching the Bible, is to believe that God will speak to us through it! We need to expect to find a word from the LORD every time we open the Good Book!
  - And I’m not talking about flipping the pages of the Bible open to a random page and plucking your finger down indiscriminately on some verse and expecting that to be God’s message to you (trust me, we’ve all done it, though!)...
  - No, I’m speaking about taking a moment before reading to ask God to reveal **ONE INSIGHT** to you when you read... one word or phrase or verse.
  - It may not be a word for you RIGHT NOW... but it will begin to be the building blocks for a lifetime of getting familiar with God’s voice!

- You've heard me speak time and time again about Scripture Journaling.
  - I cannot say enough how valuable & important that has been to me over the past 5 years of my life!
  - I've come to know God's heart better through regular Scripture Journaling, than all the hours of sermon preparation I've ever compiled.
  - If you're not familiar with this, I encourage you to pick up a free journal on your way out of church today. The instructions are in the front pages, and it's something you can do in about 20-30 minutes each day.
  - One of the great things about this program is that even though it can take you through the Bible in a year... it's not about reading the Bible in a year... it's about getting to know the voice of the Shepherd!
  - If you skip a few days (or weeks) between readings, you don't have to go back and make up what you've missed...
  - Whatever day you can read is a day that God can speak to you!
  - The journaling part just helps us put our thoughts down in more coherent form... and makes a wonderful way of checking back at the messages God has given!
- You don't have to do Scripture Journaling... but each & every one of us should be reading at least some portions of the Bible on a regular basis!
  - If you don't know where to start... pick one of the first 3 gospels: Matthew, Mark or Luke...
  - It's there that you'll come to hear the voice of the Great Shepherd... Jesus!
  - Oftentimes that voice will encourage & comfort you... but it will also challenge & frustrate you... so be forewarned!

Finally, if I'm going to be thorough in answering this Tough Question #4, I have to say what many of us already know... **There are times, no matter how hard we try, when God's voice seems to be silent.**

- We may pray for God's guidance... we might ask for direction... or life may throw us some "unexpected challenges," and all the while, we can't seem to hear God speak at all.
  - I wish I could explain why this happens... or how to get through it... but I can't.
  - I just know that David knows what it's like...

- Psalm 22 – one psalm before the much-beloved 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm (“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...”) – is a psalm of lament:
  - *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me? ...I cry out by day, but you do not answer...”*
  - In fact, Jesus even quoted this psalm when he was on the cross... when he was at the end of his earthly life, and all of his friends had abandoned him... Jesus echoed these words from his ancestor David:
    - *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*
    - Sometimes it’s very hard to cope with God’s silence.
- In her book, *God Talk: Cautions for people who hear God’s voice*, author Ruth Tucker writes, “Most people regard God’s silence as though it were the silent treatment. It is not. It is surely no sign of passive-aggressive behavior. God’s silence is neither good nor bad. It simply is.”
  - Her entire book serves as a balance for those who have a hard time hearing God’s voice...
  - She says over and over that God often resides and responds in silence.
  - *(long pause)* So whether it’s through silence or scripture... through teachers or preachers... through situations & circumstances... I believe that God does speak to us...
  - It just might take us a while to perceive it...
  - So don’t give up... be encouraged... God longs to communicate with us...
  - May we cultivate ears to hear the voice of the Shepherd! AMEN.