

In the Bible, God speaks in many ways.

In the beginning, God spoke the world into being. Pulling night from dark and separating sky and sea with a language so divine no human ears would hear. Until the day, when God spoke humanity into life and called us VERY GOOD and named us in “God’s image.”

In the histories, God spoke through mediums. Real people used to convey Gods’ words and feelings. The psalms are full of dialogue with the holy one. Our poets lift intimate thoughts and deepest emotions to the Lord, and the divine responses - God’s assurances - are recorded in the promises of faith. “The Lord heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” reads Psalm 147. “The Lord is your keeper. The Lord will keep you from all evil” in Psalm 121.

In our scripture, the prophets speak for God quite boldly. The prophets offer new language: metaphors and images of a world that is to come, a way we cannot yet fully see. When they speak, “THUS SAYS THE LORD, they teach us to hold on to hope, to dive into faithfulness, to imagine a change. When the prophets speak, “Thus Says the Lord,” we know what God has to say. Because, as the prophet Micah proclaims:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good,  
and what does the LORD require of you

but to do justice and to love kindness  
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

In our stories too, God speaks in visions and dreams. Who can forget Joseph's dream of storing up sheaves who bowed down to him. It lost his life, the dream, but saved it too. And Jacob wrestled at night with a vision of a man or was it God? Jacob walked away with a bruise on his hip, but a new calling, and a new name – powerful dream that one. And in the New Testament, Mary's visit from the angel brings news that will change the world. And Peter's trance on the rooftop in Acts where a sheet is full of all kinds of food sharing the same space and all deemed to be good. From his dream, Peter knew God's blessing of the Holy Spirit in a new way, and asked, "Who can withhold the waters of baptism from anyone?"

In our created world, God speaks too. There are the clouds of Exodus from which the voice of God appears.

In the book of Job, God's voice comes powerfully from a whirlwind. And also, God appears as a still, small voice – a whisper past Elijah's ear as he stands at the mouth of his cave waiting for a divine answer.

One of my favorite ways that God speaks through nature is pretty fun. It's in the book of Numbers. Here God speaks through a beast of burden, a prophet's donkey. You see, Balaam was the prophet, well more of an oracle of sorts when the Israelites were just beginning their invasion of the

land of Canaan. And Balaam had been summoned by a regional King to put a curse on the invaders and their God.

The Lord our God tries to tell Balaam not to follow through with the curse, that the Hebrew slaves had a calling and covenant and were to be left alone by this monarch's army. But Balaam doesn't listen, so instead, the donkey tries to get his attention. The friendly beast turns Balaam away from terrible judgment – three times! But Balaam does not understand and beats the donkey as a foolish and stubborn brute, until – finally -the donkey SPEAKS. It's then the prophets' eyes were opened and he realized the way forward in line with God's plan. So, yes, you know, as they say: God speaks in mysterious ways.

There are also in the Bible less audible ways that God speaks. The person and actions of Jesus the Christ pointing directly to God's good news for the world. The clothing offered, the prisoner visited, the bereaved lifted up. The voice of Jesus in the mouths of the oppressed. The broken bread and the new covenant cup, God's declaration of love written into our hearts.

In the Bible, we witness God communicating through various means: through actions, animals, prophets, poets, dreams, and visions. So, it is fascinating to observe that when we contemplate and discuss God speaking into our own lives, we often desire or expect a different form of communication.

We find ourselves longing for a more direct or explicit form of speech.

There ARE examples of this from scripture too. In the Gospels, there are really, **only three times** where God speaks as a voice from heaven with a bold proclamation that is clear and direct. You may remember some of these. There is Jesus' baptism: This is my son the beloved accompanied by a dove. And also the announcement at the Transfiguration. A similar word with an additional instruction "Listen to him!" God says from the cloud.

The third time God speaks clearly to the gathered people with God's own voice with God's own power is in the passage for today. Jesus, we know, is well on his way to Jerusalem. The entrance through the gates into the city on Palm Sunday is just next week, and soon after comes the cross of Holy Week, the silence of Saturday, and the resurrection of Easter Sunday. The time is now, or as John's gospel would say, "The hour has come."

Jesus is dealing with expectations of the moment. "What should I say, Father, save me from this hour? No, I shall say... Father, glorify your name." That's when we hear the voice from the heavens, clear and direct: "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again." At first the people think it is thunder, or could it be an angel speaking to him. But Jesus knows it is God's own voice preparing them for all that is to come. And Jesus says as much.

These sparse but strong examples show us that it is not wrong for us to long for a specific mode of communication from God. It's understandable. We humans have a desire for certainty and want answers to things. Scripture tells us that it does work this way – that God will speak up and speak out loud and clear – BUT only from time to time, and only about God's work in the world, and only with a word for a whole community of faith to hear.

The other day I was talking with friends who have left the church. They are burned out and church hurtled in various ways. And I affirm their decision to leave.

But there was one area in which I challenged them. They had a whole lot riding on the sermon. They were upset with the preacher for saying some things and not saying other things. Why wouldn't he comment on this or that in his sermons? Why didn't he remember these people or those individuals in the ways he prepared the word for the day? The sermon was his moment to lead his flock, to shape their lives to talk for God.

As the only working preacher in the group, I took a moment to opine. What is it about this time of one person with a microphone in the pulpit? The preaching moment we learned to call it in seminary. Do we expect too much here? Is it our desire for straight-talking divine clarity that transfers to unrealistic expectations placed on the preacher in the

pulpit? Have we been lulled into thinking the preacher speaks for God?

Maybe she does... the Holy Spirit moves... and so once or twice in her lifetime. But remember God speaks in various ways throughout history, and God continues to communicate with us today in many ways.

In worship, the preacher is sharing alongside God's voice speaking in other ways: the poetry of the music, the actions of the week, the prayers of a prophet from the ages, the hopes of your very own dreams. And friends, remember our friend Balaam and his donkey. Sometime the preacher might simply be a talking ass.

If you are only looking for God's voice in the sermon, could that be a growing edge? On our paths of discipleship, let us remain open to the diverse ways in which God communicates. Let's embrace the mystery and wonder of God's speaking into our lives knowing that God's voice can be heard and experienced in so many ways. And may this diversity invite us to listen, encourage us to hear, and lead us on our way.

I'll close today with a poem from Mary Oliver. And we invite you to spend some time after the poem listening. There are lines in the bulletin so that you can record some of the ways that God has spoken to you through the years.

She has this to say about praying:

It doesn't have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
small stones; just  
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try  
to make them elaborate, this isn't  
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak.

To God be the Glory, Time without End. Amen.