

“Obedience Begins with Listening”

*“As I walk with you I’m learning what your Grace really means,
the price that I could never pay was paid on Calvary.
So instead of trying to repay you, I’m learning to simply obey you....”*

[‘Grace’ by Laura Story]

I chose that song because of our first reading for today.

Peter and the apostles were given strict orders not to teach about Jesus, but they did anyway! How dare they!

But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority....”

And then he goes on to say that *“the Holy Spirit...is given to those who obey God”*.

We are to obey God.

But before we obey God’s command, we must know what that command is.

And that’s where I think we often run into trouble.

If we’re going to follow God, we have to hear God, but how do we know what God is saying to us?

Well, the most common answer to that question is prayer.

In a way that’s correct; and in way it’s not.

It all depends on how you think about prayer.

If you have a decision to make and you want to know what God wants you to do, and you pray,

“God, please help me make the right choice”,

and then you think about what would be the best thing, and proceed to make your choice,
you are NOT necessarily doing what God wants.

It is simply what your mind thinks is logical or what your emotions desire.

And your mind and heart might be in line with God, or they might be captive to sin,

for as we say in our Confession, “we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves”.

If we simply utter a prayer and go on to make our own decision,

it is actually highly unlikely that it will be what God wants.

For as Scripture says, “God’s ways are higher than our ways and God’s thoughts than our thoughts”.

In one story after the other throughout the entire Bible God chooses people

who logic says should not be chosen –

the 90 year old Sarah to have a child, the stuttering Moses to persuade Pharaoh,

and the young boy David to fight Goliath.

In one story after the other throughout the entire Bible God does crazy things,

like allowing Joseph to be thrown in a pit, kidnapped, sold into slavery,

be falsely accused and forgotten in prison,

or allowing Jeremiah to be rejected, mocked, put in stocks, and thrown down a well.

Just saying something to God and then walking away is not prayer,

because prayer is more than a monologue – it’s a dialogue.

It’s more than a one-way conversation – it’s a two way conversation.

It’s more than us talking to God – it’s God talking to us.

If we simply ask God a question and walk away before we hear the answer,

then we have not prayerfully considered the matter.

So the question is: how do we receive God’s answer?

There are probably an infinite number of ways (we ARE talking about God, you know!)

but let me offer five.

One way that we receive the answer is that we hear God speak,

that is, we hear a voice inside of us that we know is God's voice and not our own.

I don't hear God speak that frequently;

but the very fact that the times are infrequent makes them quite memorable for me.

There was one time when I was young and reckless and rebellious

and I did something bad, got caught, and the consequences were pretty bad.

And I remember praying and saying to God,

"I can't deal with this. I need you to get me out of this situation. I need you to fix it.

I know I was wrong and I'll never do it again, but I need you to make this go away.

Can't you give me a do-over? Can't we just like go back in time and I'll choose the right thing this time?"

And I heard God's voice say so clearly that I still remember the words to this day:

"I can't undo what you've done, but I will walk with you and we will get through this together".

Sometimes God communicates with us by speaking to us.

Another way to God communicates with us is through dreams.

Again, I don't hear from God often through dreams, but it has happened.

When I had finished seminary and gotten my Master of Divinity degree,

finished my two years of internship equivalency,

and completed my quarter of clinical pastoral education,

I had one last hurdle before me:

I needed to be approved for ordination by my candidacy committee.

My fear was that the committee would not accept my degree from Yale

and would require me to spend a year at a Lutheran seminary

so I had all my arguments prepared for why that should not be necessary.

But as it turned out they never even mentioned that.

What they did have a concern about was that I wanted to continue to do music

and they said that unless I was willing to give up being a church musician

I couldn't be a pastor. I thought they were crazy.

After all, I had had a pastor when I was growing up

who had been the Choir Director & Organist & my Confirmation Teacher. If he could do it, why couldn't I?

I was all set to make my case to them, but instead they set up another meeting.

The night before the meeting I had a dream and in the dream I was hiding behind the organ bench!

When I woke up I understood that since the age of 5, my identity had been that of a musician.

They wanted me to identify as a pastor.

And I knew that I had to be willing to give up my music if that was what God wanted.

So I went back and I told them that they were right.

I would give up my music and be only a pastor. And I did.

And it was about 20 years before God gave me the opportunity to do both again.

God communicates with us by speaking and through dreams.

God also communicates with us through visions –

similar to dreams except they occur while we're awake.

Last fall when we were moving ahead to try to sell the church property for a second time,

I wasn't sure that's what God wanted.

And so I asked God, "What should I do? Should I try to stop it?"

And immediately into my mind came this vision of a train speeding down the tracks

and along with a vision came this message,

"There's no point in standing in front of the train. It will just run over you & will probably not even notice!

You don't have to try to stop it. Just remember that I am the One who controls the tracks."

Later on, that vision was confirmed by an actual experience of train tracks being switched.

We sold the property, and as soon as I met the folks from Ephraim, I knew it had been God's will.

God communicates with us by speaking, and through dreams and visions.

God also communicates through signs.

And this is the way that God communicates to me most frequently.

It's like any friendship.

When you get to know somebody really well,

you know how to communicate with them in the most effective way
and in the way that brings them joy.

You know how to make them smile.

And God knows that when He gives me a sign,

I get so excited that I just have to tell everyone about how awesome God is!

It's kind of like our secret language.

God knows that when he gives me a sign it will delight me and bring me joy,
and because God loves me, God delights in delighting me.

Last fall I was going through a really difficult time and I was praying, saying

"I don't get it, God. I'm trying to do your will. I'm doing everything I can to please you.

But all of this bad stuff keeps happening to me. Why do I have to go through this?"

At that moment my phone rang, and in trying to answer it I hit the wrong button and I opened Facebook.

And staring at me was a post that said,

"Everything that you are going through is preparing you for what you've asked for."

I had just asked God why I had to go through something and here was my answer!

And it was such a great answer!

I said to God, "Oh! If this will get me what I asked for, I can go through it! No problem!

It will totally be worth it!"

Sometimes God communicates with us through speaking
and sometimes through dreams or visions or signs.

And sometimes God communicates with us through scripture.

When my children were little we had a nanny

who as it turned out was performing witchcraft in our house –

trying to get rid of me so that she could have my husband and my children.

I didn't take it all that seriously until my best friend through whom I had gotten the nanny

and who has her PhD and is a psychotherapist and her husband who is a cardiologist

told me I had to get this woman out of my house immediately

because my life was in danger!

A pastor friend told me to tell my bishop and the bishop reacted similarly.

I felt like I had stepped into the twilight zone.

This just couldn't be happening to me!

As I began to prepare my sermon for the week,

I opened up the Bible to the lesson appointed for the day, which was from I Peter 5.

"Be sober, be watchful.

Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

Resist him, firm in your faith....

Really?!

What were the chances that the week I'm dealing with someone performing witchcraft
is the very week the assigned lesson was that one?!

**God speaks to us & communicates with us through dreams & visions & signs & scripture,
and in other ways, too –**

like through the words of a trusted Christian friend
or through the feeling of chills or a tingling sensation we may get
when the Spirit flowing through us.

But no matter how God chooses to communicate with us,
it is God's answers – and not our questions and subsequent assumptions –
that tell us what we must do to obey.

I hope that you have had experiences of God speaking to you in these or other ways.
I hope God has spoken to you about the decision before us this morning.
But if God hasn't spoken to you or you're not sure if God has spoken to you,
then simply ask God to do that.

Jesus said that those who seek, find, that to those who ask, it will be given,
and to those who knock, it will be opened.

If you want to be sure of what God has said to you,
simply ask for God to make it clear and God will.

We are called to obey God,
But we can only obey if we receive the command,
and we will only receive the command if we ask for it and wait for it.

When we do get the command, it might be easy to understand and still hard to obey.
Because God does not call us to do what is logical or rational or reasonable.
God does not call us to do what is logical or rational or reasonable
because when we are doing that, then we are acting on our own, without God, without faith.

In story after story after story in the Bible,
God calls his people to do the illogical, the impractical, the unreasonable,
God calls his people to live by faith and not by sight.
God calls his people to walk the way of the cross,
walking into suffering and pain and loss and even death,
trusting that God will bring us through it to the other side.
And when we get to that other side
we will find out that what God has in store for us is what will delight us
for God delights in giving us the desires of our hearts.
And God wants to give us even more than that –
because God wants to give us more than we can ever ask or imagine.

My prayer for each and every one of you this day
is that you will pray and that you will receive an answer to your prayer.
Maybe you will hear God's voice, maybe you'll have a vision,
maybe you'll be given a sign, or maybe you'll receive your answer in some other way.
And when you receive your answer, I pray that you will have the courage to obey.
Because when you do what God wants, no matter what it costs in the short-term,
in the end it will be okay, for this is what God says to you
*"My child, I love you! And as long as you're seeking My face,
You'll walk in the power of My daily sufficient grace." ["Grace" by Laura Story]*

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!** Amen