

Listening for God

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

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In *An Immense World*, a book the *New York Times* named one of the 10 Best Books of last year, Pulitzer Prize winning author Ed Young describes the extraordinary ways animals engage their senses to move about, find nourishment, and protect themselves from harm. In his chapter on sound, Young introduces a man named Roger Payne who trained himself to no longer be afraid of the dark by taking long walks through nature reserves near his home long after the sun had set. During these walks, Payne became fascinated with one of his nighttime companions and decided he wanted to study this unique creature that captures its prey without any light to illuminate the darkness.

Payne imagined a series of experiments through which he could observe an owl's capacity to be guided by sound. The experiments began by taping black plastic sheets over all the windows, blocking even a glimmer of light from coming in. He then covered the floor with a thick layer of dry leaves before placing a hand-raised owl named Wol on a perch in the corner. Payne then released a mouse whose movement created a rustling noise in the leaves. Wol sat completely still on the first three nights of the experiment. But on the fourth night, Payne heard the sound of a strike moments after the mouse started to stir the leaves. When he turned the lights on, Wol had the mouse captured in his talons.

Similar experiments continued over a period of four years, confirming how barn owls are adept at locating their prey not with their eyes, but with their ears which are effectively an owl's entire face.¹ In fact, what we assume to be large feathers covering an owl's body are densely packed sensors that collect sound waves and send them through openings hidden by the feathers. These sensors equip owls with an exceptionally sensitive capacity to both detect sound and discern its precise source, allowing an owl to strike what it hears with complete accuracy. This fact was confirmed when Payne plugged one of Wol's ears with cotton and watched as Wol missed the rodent by more than a foot. An owl's life and death are "determined by the frequencies they can hear, how sensitive they are to those frequencies, and their skill at localizing the source of sound."²

While hearing is not our primary sense, like the owl, our lives may also be sustained by our capacity to listen for, hear, and localize the source of sounds around us.

For example, we know we are to run for cover if we hear thunder followed by a strike of lightning in the sky, or that we should quickly step out of the street if we hear a siren from an ambulance coming close.

But do we know how to hear and discern the voices that give us life?

Who or what do you listen for to sustain you and your neighbor?

Do you live as if God is still speaking?

Or do you live as if God is silent or disengaged?

¹ Ed Young, *An Immense World* (New York: Random House, 2023), 212.

² Young, 215.

The first word Abram hears God speak is “Go.” In chapter 12, the Lord says to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” Three verses later, seventy-five-year-old Abram’s capacity to listen for and follow God is confirmed as we read, “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.”

God continues to speak to Abram, sometimes clearly and other times in a vision. Each message comes with a promise of how Abram will, rather unbelievably, become the father of a multitude of nations even though he and his wife are old and barren. And after more than two decades of waiting, God engages Abram’s senses of sight and sound as God appears to Abram and says, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.”

I suspect many of us might be delighted to hear God say we are going to receive the desires of our heart. Such a promise might tune our ears to listen while tuning our hearts to sing God’s praise.

But what happens when we hear a different message—one in which Jesus’s words contradict everything we imagine God should say since Jesus asks something as costly as taking up the cross, a symbol Roman authorities put on “billboards advertising Caesar’s supremacy and the fate of any who dared to challenge it?”³

I have pondered the juxtaposition of these two texts in the lectionary often this week—one in which God suggests Abram walk before God and be blameless before continuing to name how God is going to do the impossible; and one in which Jesus says deny yourself, pick up your cross, and then come and follow me.

Many of us yearn to hear God speaking when we are wandering in desert-like landscapes—when we are struggling to find a secure place to call home, when we are yearning for something to make the pain go away, when we are knocking on one job opportunity door after another with no one answering. In these moments, we not only cry out to God, but we listen for assurance that God is still with us.

We are then tempted to cease listening for God when things are going well—when life is moving at a pace that keeps our blood pressure steady, when the job we really wanted is offered to us, when community and love surround us.

Think about it for a moment:

Are you more likely to hear a God who gives, one who says, “I’ll make you exceedingly numerous?”

Or a God who asks, “May I take that success, that popularity, that thing you are allowing to define you, and help you find the life that is really life?”

Jesus does not end with this invitation to pick up an instrument of death that humiliated the condemned prisoner on his way to his execution. He continues by offering the reason we pick up our crosses, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lost their life for Jesus’ sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

³ W. Hulitt Gloer, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 73.

William Placher explains how the Greek word translated, "'Save' (*sozein*), like *shalom* in Hebrew, means to have wholeness, health, integrity."⁴

Those who lose their life for Jesus' sake, will be given wholeness, health, and integrity.

Last week, the *Washington Post* hosted former Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, in one of a series of conversations planned between now and November. Ryan told the gathered crowd, "I don't think you can be good at these jobs unless you're willing to lose them...You have to get your mind at a stage in your life and career where the best move to make could put yourself in jeopardy to losing your job, but it's the best move to make."⁵

I don't think you can be good at being a member of the United States Senate or the House of Representatives, let alone the Speaker of the House, unless you're willing to lose your job for the sake of doing what is right."

Can you imagine what might happen if every Member of Congress was willing to lose their job for standing up for what they know to be right or for what their faith teaches?

What might happen if party officials demanded the truth from each person they endorsed instead of allowing any person with power to be reelected after repeating one conspiracy theory after another?

What might happen if representatives stood on the House floor and said, "Mr. Speaker, we live in one of the most resourced countries in the world. Why do we continue to allow any person to live without food, shelter, and proper care for their bodies and their minds?"

What might happen if Members of Congress who profess their faith in a savior who we call the Prince of Peace, one who told his disciple to put away his sword on the day of his crucifixion, called out a former President for boasting about how he did nothing about guns in response to one massacre after another before asking, "What will we do to reduce the sale and manufacturing of military style assault rifles and clips that no ordinary citizen walking the streets should have?"

What might happen if United States Senators started to ask aloud, "Might it be time to ponder what role we are playing in what has become a mass genocide of children?"

Those who lose their life for Jesus' sake might also lose their election, but they will do so with their integrity intact while giving their neighbor life as well.

How, then, might we tune our ears to hear God speaking to us?

What does God's voice even sound like?

Perhaps it sounds like overhearing a partner telling their beloved who is tempted to escape the madness of our city and nation that Jesus did not spend all his life in Eden.

Possibly it sounds like a prophet's voice from the past who continues to speak into the future as his words remind us of a dream that is not yet a reality for too many people in this nation.

It might sound like a friend or colleague, or naming your particular set of gifts and asking what it might take for you to become a pastor, a therapist, a writer, or whatever it might be, in a way that forces you to grapple with how you are going to lay down whatever holds in order to respond to the call God has placed on your life.

⁴ William C. Placher, *Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible: Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 118

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/02/24/gop-elder-statesmens-message-johnson-stop-dithering/>

Maybe it sounds like a nudge in the pit of your stomach that forces you to speak up and speak out for change—change in your uncle’s racist comments at the family reunion, change in your sexist colleague’s comments in the breakroom, change in your country’s capacity to continue to do harm instead of protecting life.

In her book, *Life in Five Senses*, Gretchen Rubin writes, “With hearing, as with all our senses, we perceive what our brains decide we need to perceive. They strip out what’s too familiar to bring to our attention and help us focus on what’s most interesting.”⁶

There are interesting noises all around me.

Some of them are interior voices that suggest I have not yet proven myself, so I need to work harder and achieve more.

Other voices tell me to remain silent—to not risk upsetting anyone.

Still others suggest life is all about me and what I want.

Do you know these voices?

Is it any wonder, then, that we struggle to hear the paradox of the Gospel?

Thankfully God continues to pursue us—whether we are walking blamelessly or not.

God continues to speak, whether we are ready to hear God or not.

And God is still saying, “My dear child, let me show you the way to life. Will you come and follow me?”

⁶ Gretchen Rubin, *Life in Five Senses* (New York: Crown, 2023), 65.