

Meadowbrook Congregational church

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“Speak Up God”

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Matthew 3:13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

I once heard a story about a minister who performed a great many baptisms at the shore of a local lake. A rather naïve young man, down on his luck, happened to be walking by and he received this invitation from the minister, “Would you like to find Jesus?” The young man, wanting to be helpful, agreed. The minister then escorted him into the cold waters of the lake. Much to his surprise his head was pushed under the water. As he surfaced, gasping for air, the minister shouted, “Did you find Jesus?” The young man answered, “No, I didn’t!” Once again the minister pushed his head under the water. Again when he emerged, there was that same question, “Did you find Jesus?” The naïve young man heard the question. This time he had a different answer. This time he said, “No, I didn’t. Are you sure this is where he fell in?”

I am envious of Jesus and what occurred during his baptism. The heavens opened. A dove descended. The voice of God boomed through the sky. I guess I am a bit jealous of anyone who can claim such a certain divine revelation. I have had a few people tell me about mysterious epiphanies they have experienced during worship-voices speaking to them, clouds forming a picture of Jesus, the sun shining through the overcast at a specific and meaningful moment. When people talk about these kinds of experiences, it seems as if for them, the veil of heaven is pulled away, if only for a moment. And when this moment happens, it is clear that it is God speaking directly to them.

During my first year of seminary I attended a luncheon hosted by a scholarship committee. There were six of us seminary students and one by one we were asked to go to the microphone and tell the audience about our background. The most uncomfortable part was when we had to address our call to ministry. Those who shared the dais with me were very imaginative and descriptive in answering the question. One spoke about how God had called him at Manger Square in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. Another student related an experience of waking up in a cold sweat with the hand of God literally pushing her out of bed. Another man stood up and said he received the call while offering the eulogy at his grandfather’s funeral. He immediately fell to his

knees and told the mourners that God was calling him. I told the committee that I couldn't be specific about my call. I had experienced no vision, no dream, nor any voice calling me in the middle of the night. All I could talk about was a nagging, gut feeling, more of a burr in the saddle. I could tell the audience wasn't very excited. I was just glad they let me keep my scholarship! I went back to my seat, vowing to come up with a better story the next time I was asked.

A few years ago Morton Kelsey randomly surveyed a group of regular church attendees. He was surprised to find that many of them claimed to have heard the voice of God or to have seen a vision from God. Most of them said that they had kept their experience to themselves. They said the last person that they would want to tell about their experience was their clergy person. A typical response was, "He or she would think I was crazy!"

If only each of us could have a revelation of God as clear as the baptism of Jesus! If only in those times of questioning and indecision that voice would speak from the heaven informing us that we are a beloved son or daughter and that God is pleased with us. If only we could be so assured. We wouldn't need to come to worship anymore I suppose. We wouldn't need any kind of counseling or therapy. We might all even be spiritual leaders, authors, or mystics-although no one else would then require our guidance.

But God's voice and presence usually comes to us in quieter, far less obvious and certain ways. I seriously doubt if anyone came through these doors today because they were directed by a heavenly voice or pulled off Meadowbrook Road by some divine force. It usually doesn't work that way with us. God speaks to most of us, not through heaven-descended doves, but through still, small voices. It may not be a voice from above but more likely a voice from within. The voice might be loud enough to be heard within our heart, but is usually soft enough to explain away rationally. And when the voice calls, we are prone to respond not with absolute certainty but with reluctance and doubt.

A young man was dating a woman for a period of time. Things began to get rather serious. He liked her an awful lot and he believed that he had their future together all figured out. One day he just said to her rather boldly, "I prayed to God yesterday and God told me that I was to marry you." The young woman looked at him with some surprise and answered, "Well, that is all well and good. But I will wait for God to speak to me about it."

And waiting may be the key to such divine affirmation-as long as such waiting does not imply skepticism but rather the faith to allow God to work in quiet and mysterious ways. To hear the voice of God, to find the whisper of the divine in the ordinary, we have to listen. We have to believe that God will use any handle possible to touch us and to move us. We shouldn't be shocked if we feel God has spoken to us through the words of a loved one or a friend. We should be dubious if we find a quiet reassurance overwhelming our souls in the midst of great confusion. We shouldn't be surprised if God's intention becomes a bit clearer as we pray or worship or serve one another. God still speaks if we are prepared to listen. God still speaks if we are prepared to wait out the shouts and criticisms of the culture. God still speaks, not always through a voice that will allow us to act in certainty. But God still speaks through gentle whispers and tiny nudges that ask us to respond in faith.