

Hearing God

Passage: Luke 14:31-44

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Thirty years ago, in the wake of a broken relationship, I needed to get away.

I drove over Highway 17 and ended up in Mount Hermon, walking among the redwoods. In the middle of my despair, hope filled my thoughts. I felt that God would bring life out of death. I pondered a new course, but what would it be?

I drove back over the hill, had dinner at a restaurant, and holed up in a coffee house in Campbell, journaling, reflecting, and praying. There, in that coffee house, I think I heard from God.

Amid the cacophony of voices that inundate our ears, how do we hear from God?

After being thrown out of Nazareth, his hometown, Jesus left for a nearby city on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Authoritative Teaching

Luke 4:31-32:

And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath, 32 and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority.

Jesus' teaching struck those who heard it as uniquely authoritative. Luke is unconcerned with the content of the teaching or with what specifically struck those in Capernaum synagogue as authoritative. His point, simply, is to present Jesus as one whose authority was recognized. Jesus teaches with the authority of a prophet, as one who speaks for God.

Claim: Jesus speaks for God. Is it true?

The Devil Puffs Up His Chest

Luke 4:33-34:

And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God."

The first thing Jesus did after being declared the Son of God was to go into the wilderness to face the devil, the leader of all the unclean spirits. Now, one of the devil's henchmen shows up to challenge Jesus with fighting words. Literally, the spirit, speaking through a man it is influencing, uses the words, "What to us and to you?" a Hebrew idiom of conflict (2 Samuel 16:10, 19:22; Judges 11:12; 1 Kings 17:18).

The demon, boasting of secret intelligence-gathering capabilities, wants to put Jesus back on his heels. If one side in a conflict knows what the other side is up to, it has an advantage. Knowledge of one's enemy makes one better prepared for battle.

The spirit tells Jesus, in so many words, "We know who you are and what you're up to." The demon is trying to make Jesus think that he won't be able to do anything without the devil's being aware of it, along the lines of the Police song, "Every breath you take and every move you make . . . I'll be watching you." The unholy demon of Satan, puffing up its chest, wants the Holy One of God to believe that he's in over his head.

How does Jesus respond?

Jesus Masters a Demon

Luke 4:35:

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm.

Jesus doesn't respond to the demon's saber-rattling with similar posturing. He simply commands it to be quiet and come out of the man. The demon puts up a fight, throwing the man down, but its resistance fails. A simple command from the mouth of Jesus trumps the demon's secret knowledge. In the end, what the demon knows doesn't matter. It must shut up and get out. There are no lingering effects, for the man is unhurt.

We expected Jesus, based on John the Baptist's prophecy, to do mighty works (Luke 3:16-17). It is no accident that the first of these involves vanquishing one of the devil's demons. Satan and his hordes have not only invaded the world, they've also invaded Israel, God's people. The presence of an unholy spirit in a place of worship is emblematic of Israel's problem.

By casting out the demon, Jesus brings a tortured Israelite to a state of rest on the Sabbath, the day of rest. Jesus does for one man—vanquishing the presence of evil—what he wants to do for Israel and for the entire world. Yes, he has come to destroy the demons: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). With a little skirmish in a synagogue by the sea, the battle is joined.

The Scriptures plainly teach that such beings as demons exist—evil spirits that can convince humans to cooperate with evil plans. They are, quite simply, liars. They want to influence our thoughts so that we believe their lies.

Nevertheless, they are no match for Jesus. Therefore, they are no match for us when we “put on the whole armor of God” by believing the truth that Jesus teaches, both directly and through his apostles (Ephesians 6:10-20).

What do the people think?

Authority and Power

Luke 4:36-37:

And they were all amazed and said to one another, “What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!” 37 And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.

In Luke 1-3, Luke told us who Jesus is: the Son of God, the Jewish Messiah, God’s final king. Both the devil and the demon professed knowledge of Jesus’ identity. The awe-struck synagoguegoers, however, are left to wonder about him.

As readers who have been let in on the secret, we wonder who in the story will figure it out and what will happen then. The gospel of Luke leads up to a question that Jesus asks his disciples: “But who do you say that I am?”

Peter, one of his disciples, answers, “The Christ of God,” which is another way of saying the Son of God. He answers correctly. But he and the other disciples will need repeated instructions on the meaning of Jesus’ identity (Luke 9:20).

Jesus’ mastery over the demon strengthens the synagoguegoers’ earlier assertion regarding the authority of Jesus. Jesus not only teaches with authority, he also acts with power.

Jesus masters a demon: He speaks for God.

Luke reports that the synagoguegoers were “amazed.” Is their amazement positive or negative? Are they hopeful or fearful? The demons, for example, have every reason to be fearful. They have no interest in obeying Jesus, but it looks as if they have no choice. If he teaches with authority and commands demons, some in the synagogue may be wondering, “What authority does he have to command me?”

Whether you’re amazed by Jesus in a positive or negative way depends on whether you’re interested in submitting to him.

Luke first reported that news began to spread about Jesus after he had returned from his encounter with the devil in the wilderness. Later, Jesus literally went down “into” Capernaum, and now news of him literally is spreading “into” into all places in the region of Galilee. Such publicity would prove to be a more powerful obstacle to his mission than the demon.

First, Jesus entered a synagogue. After leaving the synagogue, he enters a house.

Jesus Masters an Illness

Luke 4:38-39:

And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon’s house. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. 39 And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.

Simon would become one of Jesus’ disciples, and Jesus would rename him Peter. In the synagogue, at Jesus’ word, a demon left a man. If he did something for a man in the synagogue, those present hope he can do something for a woman in the house.

Just as he rebuked the demon, Jesus rebukes the fever. In neither case does he resort to any elaborate ritual. We’re left to conclude that Jesus’ will, not his methodology, is determinative.

So far, if Jesus wishes something to be so, it is so. Just as the demon left the man, the fever leaves the woman. Just as there were no lingering effects of the demon, there are no lingering effects of the fever, for Simon’s mother-in-law begins serving those in her house.

Jesus not only masters a demon, he also masters a sickness. We’re starting to get the idea that Jesus has come to defeat anything that would despoil God’s good creation.

God did not create this world as a domain for demons. Neither did he create it as an incubator of sickness. When sin entered the world, it opened the door for demons and sickness.

Jesus came to vanquish both demons and sickness from this world. No, he has not yet vanquished all sickness, just as he has not yet vanquished all demons. His entry into the world—his life, death, and resurrection—means that demons and sickness must submit to him. He is bringing, but he has not yet completely brought, all things into subjection under his feet. He will, for his perfect purposes, heal some people. He will also, for his perfect purposes, choose not to heal some people. If you have given your allegiance to Christ and he has not yet healed you, he will heal you.

That he vanquished a demon from a man and a sickness from a woman demonstrates his mastery over demons and sickness. Jesus masters a demon and he masters a sickness: He speaks for God.

It’s been a long day for Jesus, but it isn’t over yet.

Jesus Masters Many Demons and Many Diseases

Luke 4:40-41:

Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many, crying, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ.

The ill and the afflicted descend upon him. Jesus does for many in the evening what he did earlier in the day for Simon's mother-in-law and the man in the synagogue: he heals their diseases and he casts out their demons. He's not a one-shot wonder.

The demon in the synagogue proclaimed Jesus to be the Holy One of God. Now, as Jesus casts out more demons, they cry, "You are the Son of God!" Just as he rebuked the demon in the synagogue and commanded its silence, he rebukes these demons and commands their silence. The demons are all bark and no bite, and Jesus even takes their bark away from them.

Jesus does not allow the demons to proclaim him to be the Christ, the Jewish king who is destined to be Lord of the world, for at least two reasons. First, it is the prerogative of humans and angels, not demons, to proclaim Jesus to be the Christ and respond accordingly. Second, people will load all the wrong expectations onto the Christ. When Peter finally confesses that Jesus is the Christ, it will take much teaching by Jesus to correct his misassumptions. Even then, Peter won't fully understand his confession until Jesus rises from the dead.

Jesus masters many diseases and many demons: He speaks for God.

All in all, it's been quite a day in the town of Capernaum.

The next day, Jesus changes course.

Jesus Doesn't Care About Public Opinion

Luke 4:42-44:

And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, ⁴³ but he said to them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose." ⁴⁴ And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

After an eventful day in Capernaum in which he was surrounded by people, Jesus goes to a desolate place, where, according to Mark, he prayed (Mark 1:35). Luke later reports that Jesus would withdraw to desolate places, away from people, to pray (Luke 5:16). The adjective translated “desolate” is related to the noun translated “wilderness” in Luke 4:1, where Jesus was tempted by the devil. When Jesus emerged from the desolate place the first time, he came to Galilee and taught in the synagogues.

This time, the devil doesn’t meet him, but the people track him down. Unlike the people of Nazareth, who kicked him out of town and even tried to throw him off a cliff, these people want him to stick around.

Jesus, however, disappoints the people, who were hoping for more healings and deliverances. He must move on. Why? His reason affirms what he said in the synagogue of Nazareth after emerging from his encounter with the devil in the wilderness:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus doesn’t care about expectations. He doesn’t need popularity to bolster his identity. He isn’t running for anything. His mission doesn’t depend on public approval. He doesn’t need a ministry of thousands. In fact, he forsakes a ministry of thousands. He doesn’t need adoring fans. He doesn’t need our votes. He isn’t interested in what’s popular or in being popular.

Therefore, knowing what the Spirit has sent him to do, Jesus leaves. He heads south, to Judea, to do there what he did in Galilee: preach in synagogues.

Jesus’ message is that God, at long last, is establishing his kingdom, which involves judgment of evil and salvation from evil. Jesus will not be drawn into a sedentary mission that emphasizes healings and deliverance. The healings and deliverance go hand in hand with his message. The in-breaking of the kingdom of God means the defeat of demons and sickness. Jesus’ mission, however, is not to heal as many people as possible. For Jesus, the message takes precedence.

His mission at first is that of an itinerant preacher who heralds the arrival of the kingdom of God. He knows that he will be opposed by powerful forces, both human and demonic. Jesus will stay on the move, confounding his enemies and avoiding arrest.

Only when he arrives in Jerusalem will he stay put—and only after meeting with God (Luke 22:29-53). Jesus would not leave Jerusalem, as he left Capernaum, to preach elsewhere of the kingdom of God. No, he would stay in Jerusalem to bring in the kingdom of God. For now, though, he preaches the good news of the kingdom of God in the synagogues.

Jesus masters demons and disease, and he doesn't care about public opinion: He speaks for God.

Listen to the Words of Jesus

It seems that everyone with access to the internet deems himself or herself qualified to pass judgment on this issue and that. The world is awash with opinions. I contribute a few of my own. In such an environment, what we need is a no-doubt-about-it word of truth: a word from God. We need the words of Jesus. He speaks for God.

When people enter my study for the first time, they will often comment on the vast number of books on the shelves. I then tell them of the vast number of books that I've had to prune from my shelves to make room for new volumes.

I read most of the books to help me understand and apply what the Scriptures teach. I do so critically, sifting through what agrees with the Scriptures from what doesn't agree with the Scriptures. No author writes authoritatively the way the biblical authors do. In the beginning and the end, we start with the Scriptures and finish with the Scriptures.

When you listen to Jesus, you're not listening to opinion, and you're not listening to spin; you're listening to the truth. You're getting the straight scoop. While political leaders around us engage in what is called "the permanent campaign," our leader isn't paying attention to polls, and he is neither pandering to nor swayed by public opinion.

To hear from God, listen to the words of Jesus. Listen to him as we work our way through the gospel of Luke. You may not always understand what he says, but you know that he speaks for God. Perhaps his words will at least occasionally burn in your heart the way they burned in the hearts of the disciples who walked with him on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:32).

When you have one of these burn-in-your-heart encounters with the words of Jesus, it can stay with you and serve as a sort of anchor for your life.

When Jesus told the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which is really the story of two lost sons, the father tells his oldest son, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (Luke 15:31). I was on a personal retreat when those words burned in my heart, and they triggered one of the most profound spiritual experiences of my life. I heard my heavenly Father speak those words to me, and for about four hours I reveled in the meaning of those words. I revel in them to this day.

If you feel no impact from the words of Jesus, do not despair. Sometimes, it takes a while for his words to gestate. The words of Jesus are forming you in hidden ways. There is a cumulative effect that is hard to detect day to day. Who knows what the words of Jesus are preparing you for and when they will resurface. If you listen to the words of Jesus, you are hearing God.

Go to Desolate Place

First, to hear from God, listen to the words of Jesus. Second, go to a desolate place. Why? Because you need to distance yourself from everyone and everything that is clamoring for your attention, including your smartphone.

Everyone was looking for Jesus in Capernaum, so he needed to get away. Sometimes, it seems, everyone is looking for us in the Silicon Valley. People have expectations of us. We expect people to have expectations for us. Therefore, we need to get away to places where we can hear God.

Most people in your life are not going to encourage you to forget about them to spend time with God. Some people, like the people of Capernaum, may be disappointed if you disengage. If, however, you are going to say no to the opinions of others and yes to God, then you'll need to invest in your relationship with him.

In addition to some sort of daily rhythm of meeting with God, consider breaking away occasionally to spend a few hours, a day, or more than one day with the Lord on a regular basis. Pray. Think. Walk. Write. Read. Reflect. Don't worry if your mind wanders. A wandering mind inspires prayer, as you think of things to pray for, and it also springs from prayer, which inspires new paths of wandering. Prayer and reflection are mutually reinforcing.

It is far more important to cultivate a relationship with God than to seek direction from God. Cultivating a relationship with God predisposes us to receive direction from God. More often than not, I felt that I received direction from God at times when I wasn't seeking it. Moreover, the direction that I have sensed from God has usually felt more like a nudge than an imperative, more like a suggestion than an order.

Before marching off assuming that you have received direction from God, ask yourself two questions. First, does this direction resonate with the Scriptures? Second, does this direction resonate with my heart, with what I already know about myself? The answers to those questions may not be apparent. You may have to sit with them for a while.

Notice that when Jesus moved on from Capernaum, his reason for doing so resonated with the Scriptures (Isaiah 61) and with what he had already heard from God (Luke 4:21).

Be forewarned, however: God will confound you at times, just as he confounded the people of Capernaum. He'll tell you to leave Capernaum, where the possibilities for ministry seem endless, and remain in Jerusalem, where ministry comes to a screeching halt. He'll tell you to move when it seems as if you should stay. He'll tell you to stay when it seems as if you should move. He will close doors that you want opened and open doors you want closed.

What fun!

Albert Thong, a longtime PBCer, went on his first ever personal retreat last week and felt that he connected with God on the coast, near Pescadero. He meditated on the story in John 4 in which Jesus meets a woman at Jacob's well and offers her living water. Albert hiked to the coast and sat on a rickety bench and felt that it became for him Jacob's well. "Jesus met me there," Albert said. "I'm a newbie at personal retreats, but I feel like it's a new beginning of sorts, resetting things that have drifted."

Thirty years ago, I went to a desolate place in the Santa Cruz Mountains to meet with God. Then, by myself in that coffee house in Campbell, I heard no audible voice, but I felt something. I felt a desire to start a new ministry for young adults at this church.

That desire resonated both with my heart and the Scriptures, for in that coffee house, the Spirit brought to mind Ephesians 5:22-33, where the apostle Paul instructs husbands to love their wives as Christ loves his wife, the church. Well, I had no wife, but I felt the Spirit saying to me something like, "Why don't you lay down your life for the church?"

In January and February 1996, I asked a few people to join me. In March, we prayed together. In April, we started the Young Adults Fellowship (still the Young Adult Fellowship!).

To Hear from God

That was thirty years ago. A few weeks ago, I went back to the Santa Cruz Mountains and retraced my steps. I walked again among the redwoods of Mount Hermon. I again visited that coffee house in Campbell, which is now a Starbird Chicken restaurant. I still need to go to a desolate place to hear from God. Did I hear anything this time?

Well, I marveled at what came of that wilderness experience thirty years ago and what God did by whispering into the heart of one lonely, hurting dude. But I didn't retrace my steps simply to marvel in what God did. I did so not least to remind myself that God still speaks. And though I didn't feel something quite so profound this time, I had the strong sense that I would in the future. I say to the Lord, as Samuel did, "Speak, for your servant hears" (1 Samuel 3:10).

To hear from God, go to a desolate place.

Your assignment (should you choose to accept it!) is to get by yourself for at least two hours sometime before the end of the month. Take a Bible and pick a text, such as John 4 or Luke 15, to meditate on. Alternate between reading, reflecting, and journaling, writing down whatever reflections come to mind.

To hear from God, listen to the words of Jesus.

Consider the words of Jesus from this passage. There aren't many of them. Few people would make memory verses out of these words, but they are the words of Jesus, who speaks for God. Read each sentence slowly and then spend at least a minute pondering it:

– “Be silent and come out of him!”

– “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.”

What now?