

5 Lent: April 10, 2011
 St Stephen's, San Jose
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Week 5; God is Closer Than You Think: Knowing God's Voice

Ezekiel 37:1-14 The valley of dry bones

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11 The Spirit of God, the same one who rose Jesus, lives in you.

John 11:1-45 Many saw that Jesus had raised Lazarus; they put their faith in him.

[John Ortberg; Wk 5 video; and his book, chapter 7]

Have you ever noticed how different / unique God has made each of us?

In his book "God is Closer than You Think" John Ortberg tells a story of his two daughters. It is bedtime for his girls; he goes into the first bedroom to find his daughter snuggled in bed, surrounded by stuffed animals and dolls. He sat on the edge of the bed, looked into her eyes and said, "I am so grateful you are alive. Do you have any idea how much I love you? There is no gift in my whole life like the gift of being your dad." She stared up at him and said, "Daddy, I love you so much..." His eyes and hers well up with tears; she puts her arms around his neck. Ortberg says it was a Hallmark moment.

He walked to the next bedroom. His other daughter is also surrounded by stuffed animals and dolls. She is not in that twilight state between being awake and asleep, because this daughter has no in twilight state. She is full on or full off. He gave her the same heartfelt speech. "I am so grateful you are alive. Do you have any idea how much I love you? There is no gift in my whole life like the gift of being your dad." She stared up at him, and suddenly became still, as she said, "Daddy, you have something hanging out of your nose."

We are each different; we will each experience God's presence and learn to relate to Him in different ways. We each have one or more spiritual pathways that bring us closer to God. These will be discussed in small groups, but here is the list:

Intellectual – through study

Relational – through shared experiences with other people

Serving – through our helping people in need

Worship – but beware of seeking spiritual highs rather than God Himself

Activist – change things, seek bringing justice

Contemplative – quiet time for deep thought

Creation – God's handprint in nature

Determine which pathways bring you close to God, and incorporate practices into your day that involve those pathways. >> Examples of other 'pathways'?

Have SOME involvement in EVERY pathway. Stretch yourself.

Do not envy other people's pathways more than your own. Each of us is unique.

Do not be tempted to judge someone else's pathway. All bring us to God.

So find and build upon your personal spiritual pathways.

[Bill Hybels - 'Whisper' - chapter 4] Another element in feeling close to God is to recognize God's voice. First, to hear God's voice, we need to carve out times of silence; no cell phone, no TV; no texting; no emails; no FB; no Twitter; As Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still and know that I am God."

We are conditioned with noise filling our day. Take notice this week how few silent times there are in your day; music in every store; the radio in your car; TV on in the other room; feeling the need to fill any quiet space in a conversation. Jesus often made time to be alone, especially when he had serious decisions to make. He had favorite places to go, to pray and to listen. And by making a place and a time, he heard from God the Father a lot.

One good way to listen is to read and reflect on a bible passage, and then say to God, "If you have something to tell me, I am listening as carefully as I can." Then just listen.

Some people read, reflect, write down observations, then pray, and listen.

Some write out their prayers; and then read the result to God; then listen.

And for a place; some have a favorite chair in the living room.

Some go to their office 30 minutes early.

Some journal and pray in their car before walking into the office.

Some find a neighborhood coffee shop and take up a corner table.

> What place do you often go to, to be with God?

A key is that we do these things consistently.

Sometimes what we hear in these times will make sense; but sometimes they will only confuse us. We have to test every impression to make sure it is from God.

Bill Hybels has five filters he uses to help him test what he hears.

If a God-whisper does not make it through all five filters, he seriously questions it.

If it does make it through these filters, even if confusing or challenging, he does everything he can to obey it. Here are the five filters;

1. Ask God, "Is this thought really from you? Does this square with who I know you to be?" God is not going to ask you to do something that is inconsistent with His character. And by knowing Jesus' character, we know God's. So if we think we are being led to make fun of someone because they are 'different' from us, or if we are unwilling to forgive, this is not God talking to us. If the thought would bring glory to God, it would pass this filter.
2. Is it Scriptural? Can you imagine Jesus taking the action you are considering taking? (Romans 8 today, "The mind controlled by the Spirit brings life and peace." Would the action bring peace to the people around you?
3. Is it wise? Jesus told his followers (Matthew 10:16) "Be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." A thought to take all your money to buy a lottery ticket would flunk this test. A thought to study for a test would be pass.
4. Does it resonate with your own character? If what you are hearing involves a complete change from who you are, it needs to be confirmed in other ways. The Gospel lesson points out how much Jesus deeply loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Yet he still waited to make his visit, a visit that could have saved Lazarus from death. But Jesus had the character trait of patience to let God's plan unfold. As much as he loved Lazarus, he was patient to make sure God's plan could happen. I compare that, not well, against my complete lack of patience in so many areas. One of those areas is my career advancement. I was anxious for so many years, and could not wait for God or for the company president, or for my own manager to recognize that I was ready for the next step. And so I could have used this filter earlier in my life, to force myself to be patient for God's plan.

5. What do the people you trust most think about it? Proverbs 11:14, “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” Go to two or three veteran Christ-followers; describe the situation; ask them if they think God is really speaking to you, or did you somehow get your wires crossed? An example might be a thought to resolve an argument.

What do you do when it has been months without a whisper from God?

Ask God to make your hearing better.

Reduce the amount of noise in your life.

Fill your head with Scripture.

(Mother Teresa)- Go back to the last whisper you received and follow it exactly.

Maybe God is whispering to you today, maybe right now; About a new opportunity; a new assignment; a new start in life; to end a bad habit, to adopt a good one; to serve the poor, or your spouse, or a best friend.

Let God know you are listening. Tell God you are ready to do what he says. Build your strongest spiritual pathway into your day. Make a time and place to listen to God. Test your thoughts, to know which are from God.

God is whispering to you. And God is closer than you think.