

Prayer of Commissioning (Linda Gould)

Just before Christmas, I announced to the congregation that our Elders' Board had hired Linda Gould to join our staff team as our part-time worship pastor; Linda has been operating in that capacity since the beginning of January. The decision to hire Linda came out of months thinking and praying about what is core to who we are, and what we are becoming as a church.

Prayer and worship are intimately linked; these two are relational activities that keep our hearts and minds open, attentive, and submitted to Jesus; He's the Lord of the church and we want to be aligned to Him. This morning, in an official kind of way, I want to pray a prayer of blessing and commissioning over Linda, but before I do that I've asked her to share her heart a little bit. And so Linda, why don't you come?

Last week, as we were singing, Linda read a prayer written by A.W. Tozer that was taken from his book, *The Pursuit of God*:

*"O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more...O God, the Triune God, I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made more thirsty still. Show me Thy glory, I pray Thee, that I may know Thee indeed. Begin in mercy a new work of love within me. Say to my soul, 'Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.' Then give me grace to rise and follow Thee up from this misty lowland where I have wandered so long. In Jesus name. Amen."*¹

It's a beautiful prayer isn't it? It's a prayer of desire that both calls out to God and to our own soul: awake my soul, hunger and thirst for God! Jesus increase my hunger for your Word, increase my thirst for your Presence! Your love is better than life!

Last Sunday we invited you to join us in 40 days of prayer, a 40 day pursuit of intimacy with God. We've made a prayer room available to you throughout the week, there is a daily prayer guide available on our website. I know for a fact that the last 7 days has already been a struggle for many of us. I want to remind you that these 40 days aren't about getting perfect attendance, it's about being attentive to Jesus and welcoming His Word, His thoughts, and His plans into your life. Let me encourage you to keep going, to keep pressing in, to keep carving out time to be alone with Jesus in prayer.

This morning, I want to talk about a subject is very near and dear to my heart, largely because it's essential to a life of intimacy with God. The title for my message comes from I book I read nearly 20 years ago, "*Listening To The God Who Speaks*". This morning, I want to talk with you about the importance of training our ears to hear the voice of Jesus.

Words are in the air, all around us. Everyday we hear hundreds, and thousands, of words. Some words are so commonplace and routine that they go in one ear and out the other. Other words are unexpected and catch us by surprise. We live in a world of words, speaking and listening: words, words, words.

¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, 19-20.

Our entire faith is based upon the conviction that God has spoken, and that He continues to speak. In every relationship, communication is key to intimacy. When prayer becomes an act of listening and speaking, we find ourselves being ushered into a whole new realm of encounter and intimacy with God.

If you grew up in a church like I did, then you may have grown up thinking about prayer as a monologue; we speak and God listens. But it is really hard to square this kind of thinking with what we read in the Bible. Klaus Bockmuehl writes, “The entire Bible is a record of God’s speaking in human history.”² Word by word, object by object, creature by creature, God spoke the world into being.

But not all of God’s words in the Scriptures were creating words, some were revealing words, some were directing words, some were words of promise, some were words of judgement, some words were aimed at the present, and others pointed to the future. If we were to come up with a list of adjectives to describe God, we could not include the word “mute”.

As you flip through the Bible, on page after page, we hear God speaking: to Adam and Eve, to Noah and his family, to Abraham and Sarah, to Jacob and Rebecca, to Joseph, to Moses, to Joshua... we hear God speaking to the rich and to the poor, to sons, daughters, mothers and fathers, to kings and to commoners. He spoke to Samuel and David, to Jesus, to Mary, to Cornelius, to the elders at Antioch, and I could keep going...the list is long and detailed.

But the question I want to pose this morning is: *the God who spoke to Samuel in the middle of the night, the God who spoke to Mary*

through an angel, the God who spoke to Joseph about the dreams of Pharaoh, the God who spoke to Paul as his boat was going under...does this same God still speak like this today ? I’m convinced He does.

And I want to walk through Scriptures this morning to outline why God speaks, how we can train our ears to hear His voice, and how He speaks. So let me begin by addressing the “why” and set this question within the context of the life and ministry of Jesus.

1. Why does God speak? A Brief Look at the Life of Jesus.

When we think about Jesus, it’s so important to keep in mind that He was fully God **and** fully human. Jesus had the same physical needs we have. Jesus had the same emotional and relational needs we have. And Jesus needed to hear the voice of the Father every bit as much as we do. Here’s three reasons why Jesus needed to hear the voice of His Father:

- **first**, Jesus needed to be told who He was (naming/blessing/identity).

At His baptism, before Jesus had done a single thing in ministry, the Father named Him, blessed Him, and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. The words the Father spoke over Jesus, were the bedrock of

² Klaus Bockmuehl, *Listening To the God Who Speaks*, 13.

His life and calling. *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”*³ How many of us end up treading water throughout life because we have never been named and blessed?

illus: A few weeks ago, I heard someone tell the following story. The last days of czarism in Russia were devious and dangerous times. Even the priests were doing all they could to make a last grab at power and wealth in order to protect their standing in a rapidly changing society. But not John of Kronstadt. This Russian Orthodox priest would make his way out into the streets where poverty and addiction was running wild. John would approach people lying in the gutter, he would take a person by the chin and raise their heads until their eyes met his own and then he would utter: *“This is beneath your dignity. You were meant to house the glory of God.”*

All of us need to be told who we are and what we’ve been made for. My brothers and sisters, do you know who you are? Do you know how valuable and precious you are to God? Have you dared to believe that you are God’s beloved? If we do not hear the voice of Jesus, telling us who we are...then we might end up believing the voice that tells us that we aren’t enough...not smart enough, or beautiful enough, or skilled enough, or strong enough. We need to hear the voice of Jesus.

- **second**, Jesus needed the Father’s direction.

Mark 1:35-39 says, **35** *Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.* **36** *Simon and his companions went to look for him,*

37 *and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!”* **38** *Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”* **39** *So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.*

Did you catch it? The link between prayer and the Father’s direction? When the disciples found Jesus they were a little anxious: *Jesus, everyone is looking for you! It’s show time...get out there and do your thing! These people have real needs: they need to be taught, loved, and healed...go gett-em!*

To which Jesus replied, *“Let’s go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”* Verse 35 tells us that Jesus is praying, and while we’re not told explicitly, I’d argue that Jesus was practicing listening prayer: *Father, what would you have me do today? Where do you want me to go? Which needs are you inviting me into?*

How many of you find yourself, right now, in the midst of a significant decision? About what to do when you graduate from high school? Or, whether to take that new job? Or how to come alongside a friend who’s going through a dark time? Or how to reveal Jesus to your neighbour, friend, or co-worker?

Do ever long to draw on the experience and wisdom of someone who is 10 steps ahead of you in life? Jesus drew on the wisdom and direction of His Father in Heaven, the One who is directing all of life

³ Matthew 3:17. All Scripture quotations will be taken from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

according to His good purpose. We need to hear the voice of Jesus, directing us in the way we should go.

- **third**, Jesus needed the Father's words to shape His own words.

When it comes to words in our day and time, there is thirst for originality. Marketing campaigns are typically centered around saying something that is new, clever, and catchy; if you want to make money or gain notoriety, say something, invent something, or market something that has never been seen or heard.

Jesus didn't share our passion for originality. Much of what He said was a re-telling of the thoughts and ideas contained in the Hebrew Scriptures; the rest of what He said came straight from the mouth of His Father in Heaven.

In John 8:28 Jesus said, "*I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.*" In John 12:49-50 Jesus said, "**49** *For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. 50* *I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.*"

In Mark 2, we read about the encounter between Jesus and a paralytic. Jesus was at a house teaching, and the room was packed, the door crammed with people. The four friends who came carrying their paralytic friend knew that they would never get through the door and so they dug a hole in the roof and lowered their friend from above.

⁴ Mark 2:5.

And upon seeing this young man's broken body, to the utter amazement of everyone present, Jesus said, *Son, your sins are forgiven.*⁴ **What?!** Only the Father saw what was needed most, and Jesus, who only said what the Father told Him to say, was given the right words at the right time.

Have you ever been lost for words? Perhaps you've had a burden that weighed on you so heavily that you couldn't find words to pray? We need the voice of Jesus. Jesus, how should I pray about this situation or burden? The Bible tells us that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is the gift of tongues. The gift of tongues is given by God to enable our spirit to pray in alignment with the Spirit...we may run out of words, but the Holy Spirit prays within us.

Have you ever sat with someone who is dying, or with a person who has lost a loved one? I have. What do you say? Jesus, please give me words of comfort and hope. We need to hear the voice of Jesus.

2. Training Our Ears to Hear

Let me read for you some words from John 10. Jesus said, **11** *I am the Good Shepherd...3* *The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4* *When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5* *But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.*"

The promise is that we will know His voice; Jesus will speak in such a way that we will be able to hear and respond...but, like any other relationship, our ears will need to be trained so that we can recognize His voice.

Illus: A few years ago, my younger brother, His wife and kids, and my dad all moved out to Yarrow and bought a house that sits on three acres of land. In the last couple of years he's bought a truck, a tractor, and now he's beginning to add farm animals...he's got some laying hens, and two sheep.

Awhile back, Naomi and I and the kids went out to visit and we were introduced to his two sheep: Oreo and Buttercup. I'm a city kid through and through, but I'm learning a thing or two about sheep, the first being that sheep can be really skittish. When Naomi and I climbed into the sheep pen, they immediately went behind the shed to hide, and when poked our head around the corner to take a closer look at them they took off running at warp speed.

Now I can't tell Oreo and Buttercup apart, but my brother can. And as afraid as they are of me, when Chris crouches down and calls their names, they come to him; they've learned to recognize and trust his voice.

I read this week that to this day, shepherd from the east often have an individual call for each sheep; when the shepherd calls, they recognize the voice and respond.⁵ I also learned this week that sheep

have terrible eyesight, but excellent hearing, and so they are absolutely dependent on what they hear.

Are we any different friends? Sometimes we trust our eyes too much, and our ears too little. Let's say you get into an argument with a friend and conclude that your friend is being pig-headed and insensitive...this is what you can see and measure. But the God who knows everything, might see something very different, an insecurity, an internal wound that causes them to push away everyone they love. We need need the voice of Jesus because so often we can't trust what we see.

Or maybe you're making a decision about your life's direction, and open doors are slamming all around you. You might conclude that you don't have what it takes, or that the direction you're heading is the wrong direction. The problem is, we are often blind to what is really going on; we cannot see what God sees. *Jesus, can you tell me what you see? I need your voice to guide me!*

D.A. Carson writes, "Unlike Western Shepherds who drive their sheep, often using a sheep dog [or a stick], the shepherds of the Near East, both now and in Jesus' day, lead their flocks, their voice calling them on...Their sheep follow simply *because they know his voice*".⁶

You can use a dog or a stick to drive sheep from behind; as we all know, the threat of pain can be a powerful motivator to move in a particular direction. But if our Shepherd is out in front, leading the

⁵ Leon Morris, *NICNT: The Gospel According To John*, 447.

⁶ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According To John*, 383.

way, all He has is His voice and His character: our decision to follow is entirely dependent on His trustworthiness and love.

John 10:14-15 Jesus said, *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.* The One who calls to us, is the One who laid down His life for us at the cross. And Jesus, the One who speaks to us, isn’t content to bark out commands to unruly sheep. He knows the details of our lives. He calls us by name. He invites us into intimacy. *“I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father”.*

The same closeness that Jesus enjoyed with the Father is what He intends for us. And more often than not, the things that we will hear from Jesus will have to do with our relationship with Him.

Let’s now turn our attention to our last question:

3. How do we hear the voice of Jesus?

Let me offer a few suggestions. We hear the voice of Jesus through God’s Word, through others (prophecy), through dreams, through visions, and through our thoughts.

- **Through God’s Word:** 2 Timothy 3:16 says, *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness”.* The Scripture is God-breathed...it comes straight from His mouth and it reveals, it instructs, it gives life. Next week Linda Rae and Shane are going to teach about the importance of God’s Word in developing intimacy with God.

- we also hear the voice of Jesus **through others**, that is, through prophecy. In the Old Testament, God would raise up prophets and He would give them words to speak to the people. Things are different now, on this side of the cross. For one thing, none of us carry the weight of an Old Testament prophet; none of our words are equal with the Scriptures. But then, prophecy is no longer limited to one or two select individuals; the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all who claim Jesus as Forgiver and Leader...all of us can hear from God.

How many times have you been in conversation with someone and they said something to that only God could have known? Maybe it was a piece of wisdom, or an encouragement that felt as though God was speaking to the deepest part of you. We can hear the voice of Jesus through others.

- the Scriptures contain many examples of God speaking to people **through dreams and visions**, and Jesus continues to speak to His people through these means.
- and Jesus also speaks to us, in our minds, by way of **our thoughts**.

Illus: I wonder if we don’t miss much of what Jesus is saying because He speaks to us through through the most ordinary or “normal” of means (a thought, an impression, a feeling)? I suspect many of us have heard God speak, but we didn’t know it was Him.

At the Men’s Retreat last year I was talking with someone who told me that they didn’t hear God’s voice. As we talked further, I asked him a few questions and I discovered that he loved to encourage people.

Often through his day, someone would come to mind, sometimes a person he hadn't been in contact with for years, and then by email or phone he would connect with that person and encourage them. I asked him, "*Why do you think those people come to mind out of the blue?*" So you're sitting there, minding your own business, and out of the blue a person comes to mind, accompanied by a strong desire to encourage and bless them. Sound to me like the voice of Jesus.

1 Corinthians 2:16 says that we have the mind of Christ...doesn't it make sense that from time to time the Holy Spirit will impart to us the thoughts of Jesus?

Illus: I was in the library last week, in the quiet study room, getting ready to preach. At one point the guy seated next to me asked if I would keep an eye on his computer; he wanted to step out to buy something to eat. I told him "*no problem,*" and off he went. He came back a minute later with a worried look on his face; he told me he couldn't find his wallet.

He checked the ground around his study table, he checked his jacket pocket, he double-checked his pants' pockets...nothing. And out he went again, presumably to check his car or retrace his steps. But as he stepped out of the room, I prayed for him, and I said, *Jesus, you know where his wallet is, will put a thought in his mind so that he will know where to look?*

Wouldn't you know it, he came back into the room 20 seconds later and he went straight for the garbage can and started digging around. He emerged moments later with his wallet, and with his hands raised over his head he said very loudly: *I found it!* I just smiled to myself...*you just heard God speak.*

Pedram's testimony: at this point I would like to invite someone from our congregation, Pedram, to come and share a time in his life when he heard God speaking to him. **Pray for Pedram to conclude.**

Jesus said, "*14I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father...[The Good Shepherd] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.* Jesus knows us. He knows our name and the details of our life. What this means is that we can trust Jesus to speak to us in a personal way.

Think about Pedram's story: God knew that Pedram liked to argue, He knew the band that Pedram liked to listen to and the name of the album, and use all of this personal knowledge of Pedram, along with the Scriptures, to speak to Pedram and guide him in the right direction. Jesus knows you inside and out. When Jesus speaks, more often than not, His words will be of a personal nature, and His words will come in a way that is personal to you.

Training our ears to hear the voice of Jesus ushers us into a deep inner life of responsiveness to the Father. Not only does Jesus know the details of your life, He knows all about your future, your destiny. He speaks, in part, to allow you to understand what He is up to, and where He is leading you.

I had a challenging time this week getting ready to preach; it was largely an exercise in deciding what I wouldn't have time to say. As you may know, we are currently teaching a Transforming Pathways class called "*Hearing God's Voice*" on Sunday nights. Last Sunday

was the first class, and if anything I have said has piqued your interest, let me encourage you to come tonight at 7 p.m. and join in, it's not too late to come.

As I draw this message to a close, I want to read a few words taken from a book entitled, "*Listening To The Voice of Jesus*":

"what Jesus speaks, he speaks on behalf of the Father (Jn 12:50). The words of Jesus are the bread by which we live (Jn 6), the living water for which we thirst (Jn 7:37-38), and the light of the world (Jn 8:12)...This voice is powerful. Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out of the grave and back from the dead (Jn 11:43). This same voice tenderly called Mary Magdalene by name in the garden following the resurrection (Jn 20:16). And on some level this is what we all long to hear--to hear Jesus call our names."⁷

"we long to hear the voice of Jesus in the midst of competing demands and expectations that we all face in the world...This is the voice that will give clarity, meaning and direction to our lives, enabling us to know who we are and who we are called to be. We somehow know that the voice of Jesus will enable us to live with courage and grace in a broken world."⁸

This is my growing desire: to be open and attentive to Jesus, moment by moment.

Response time: This morning I'm going to ask you to actively respond to Jesus. If you have a desire to grow in your ability to hear the voice of Jesus, then I want to invite you to come forward so that we can pray for open and attentive ears. This isn't an invitation for the spiritual heavyweights, or for the spiritual lightweights, this is for all of us. Why would any of us want to navigate through life and not hear Jesus clearly?

Maybe right now you don't desire to hear His voice, but you want to desire Him, come forward too and we'll pray for you too. Maybe you would say to me, *Mark, apart from hearing the voice of Jesus, I have problems with my physical hearing* (there's pain, buzzing, issues), you come forward too and let us pray for healing.

If you're not sure if should come forward, just come and be blessed. We've got a number of people ready to pray for you, and as you come, don't feel the need to say anything, they already know what to pray for, just come. Maybe just let the pray-ers know your name, and if you have a physical problem with your ears, let them know that as well, but other than that, just come.

⁷ Gordon T. Smith, *Listening To The Voice of Jesus*, 11-12.

⁸ Smith, 12.