

Hearing in the Silence

Menno Mennonite Church
August 15, 2021

Purpose: To explore the way God speaks to us in the day to day, even in unexpected ways.

Message: We are invited to listen to the still, small voice of God even in the unexpected.

Scriptures: Judges 6:33-40, Psalm 29

Synopsis: Often times, the concept of listening to the voice of God seems a bit incredulous to us. We are not a people who are given to definitive statements of “because God said so.” With all of the voices and controversies that we are often met with, to actually listen for the voice of God in the world and in our time seems like a task for a bygone mystical age and identity. Yet, we are called to come before the words of God, both recorded in scripture and that are still being spoken, with awe, reverence, and an openness to hearing that which presents itself.

Judges 6:33-40

³³All Midian, Amalek, and the Kedemites
joined forces;
they crossed over
and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel.

³⁴The spirit of the Lord enveloped Gideon;
he sounded the horn,
and the Abiezrites rallied behind him.

³⁵And he sent messengers throughout Manasseh,
and they too rallied behind him.

He then sent messengers through Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali,
and they came up to meet the Manassites.

³⁶And Gideon said to God,

“If You really intend to deliver Israel through me
as You have said—

³⁷here I place a fleece of wool on the threshing floor.

If dew falls only on the fleece
and all the ground remains dry,
I shall know that You will deliver Israel through me,
as You have said.”

³⁸And that is what happened.

Early the next day,
he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew from the fleece,
a bowlful of water.

³⁹Then Gideon said to God,
“Do not be angry with me if I speak just once more.
Let me make just one more test with the fleece:
let the fleece alone be dry,
while there is dew all over the ground.”

⁴⁰God did so that night: only the fleece was dry,
while there was dew all over the ground.

I would have to guess that many of us would take pride in our gut. We relish the sense of intuition and pride that comes with making a decision by what the facts say, sure, but even more so by the sense of the situation that gives us our read of what is going on and what is important. Do your research. Check for signs and signals that tell you what the way might be, and then listen to the native inclination that tells you what to do. There is a lot to be said for that. I am guessing many of you have your reasons for doing what you do, but there is also a bit of “because I know its right in there too.” I know that I value my sense of intuition keenly. One of the banes of modern technology for me is the GPS. As helpful as it is at times to find the specific places and ways in the details, I much prefer to do the bulk of the distance driving especially freehand, relying on a more generic sense of direction and orientation to get basically from point A to B, bringing in the tech to finish the job once I have gotten there for good or for ill. Many are the time when I yearn the exasperated GPS voice pleading with me as I blow by one recommended U turn after another, to say nothing of my patient wife. Most of the time, the gut works out; sometimes it does not, catastrophically, but that is where the fun is, after all.

Think about the decisions that you have made already this morning. You decided to stop hitting snooze on the alarm clock, to get out of bed, get ready for the day. You decided that you would wear that shirt and not the other, to actually come ahead and attend church. On and on it goes, so much so that by in large we don't think about the minor decisions of our lives so much as decisions. They are the background noise, operating system of living, it is just as well that we don't go into full analysis and weighing mode for each decision. To do otherwise is to invite paralysis of thought and mind along the way. Among the many levels of decision making, big and small, though, I wonder: what role has seeking God in the matter played? How often do we think through our choices in terms of discerning where God is, what God is going?

I really don't mean this as a gotcha sort of moment at all; it is an honest question. We may drop in a “Lord willing” into our speech from time to time, but we are basically accustomed to doing what we want when we want by in large, and God doesn't come into it to often along the way. It pushes us in a real sense, and we can become a little bit allergic to invoke the almighty into the stuff of our lives, our living, our church. Perhaps it is a result of the liberty we take and the relative power over our lives that we do, gratefully, wield, but God's will in our lives might even sound a bit superstitious to our rationalistic North American sensibilities; most

of the time God is the guidance in the rear view mirror, if at all, as much as the guiding force going forward. So how do we seek God's will actively as part of the decisions that we lead?

Say what you will about the Old Testament, it doesn't fit well on a bumper sticker. Outside of the beauty of the poetry and wisdom books, much else is a bit too dense to make easy sayings or ready advice. Which might make it odd to turn to the Hebrew tradition to attempt to answer a fairly practical question. Especially in a text like this—Judges one of the history texts, in the interlude between the rule of Deborah and then on to Gideon, both outlined by the stories of the battles that Israel fights among its enemies foreign and domestic. These are the long explanations of the whys and wherefores of the early history of Israel, and the ruin of many of a well intentioned “read the Bible in a year” program, mine included.

Yet we lose something when we read these texts only as a narrative history of who did what to whom, and whose head ended up on a stick. That is there to be sure, but I am not convinced that this is why we need these texts in the overall canon of the Bible. The broader point that is being made here is time and again narrating the nature of God with the people, with Israel, with their triumphs and their defeats. It is the story of people making faith real in the real world, often in circumstances far more trying than those we are likely to face. In that there is much to learn if we are willing to go and glean the spiritual grain in the midst of the historical challenges along the way.

Gideon is an ideal story of such a thing. Just to refresh ourselves beyond the notion of the guy who places Bibles in the hotel room night stands, Gideon is a unlikely leader in unlikely circumstances. Israel had been routinely raided by a ravaging hoard, and the Angel of the Lord who calls Gideon into service finds him hiding the grain from the coming desolation, and in a mood to be rather skeptical of promises of deliverance. From the very first, he asks for proof. Then it was provided him in the form of demonstration of power. Now, the word has come again and he is beginning to do what he was first invited to do. As the story continues, it is one that time and again surprises as he is asked to shrink his forces and do things in the most peculiar way that no one might doubt that YHWH has done this. It is well worth the read.

Back to the issue at hand. Gideon stops and tests God—rarely a good idea anytime, especially in the Old Testament, especially when you were expressly asked to do something and you say “yea, God, but let me make sure...” Twice. He proposes these odd tests—the laying out of wool to get the right amount of dew to confirm the way of God in all things. Perhaps the

moral of the story is what not to do with he almighty when it comes to taking orders. But the opposite happens—he receives what he asks for and gains the clarity for all the rest.

There is much to learn from the Gideon story, and those like it in the text about seeking the will of God. First and foremost is the simple fact that he is asking the question at all. He is faced with a decision and he seeks clarity. How often do we have decisions in our lives where we simply do not bother to seek the will of God? Maybe we're not comfortable with the ways in which this has been done, maybe we just feel stupid, maybe and most likely we do not expect a real response. But when we ask the question, we can be often surprised by the results. Seldom is the will of God as clearly displayed as a wet sheep skin, but if we seek God's will honestly (and that means coming with an open hand to hear, not just to have our own opinion confirmed) we can often be surprised by the results. I have long said that the most important line of the Lord's prayer is this: thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven. That phrase alone stretches us time and again to seek, fully the will of God beyond our own need, comfort, or even expectation, especially as we pray it every day.

Secondly, the model of testing what we think we have heard has power. While none of us expect to specify the pattern of dew on the lawn (at this point I think we would just like some moisture, thanks), coming with "this is what I have in mind; may it be clear that you are in this" has a great deal of merit. Part of the skepticism that we often give 'the word of the Lord' is the individual nature of the call outside of community input or critique. I had a friend who was convinced for a time that he was to take to a horse and ride the country preaching the Gospel, and would not listen to anyone else speaking to it. It didn't come together, but it does stick in the mind. When we are baptized, we commit to the discipline of giving and receiving counsel. This critical yet often over looked element of church life is necessary as part of the calling process and testing process of hearing God's voice, both in speaking to that which we are trying to test, and that which, perhaps we are not ready to hear. We need this individually. We need this corporately. What, I wonder, might come up were we to begin asking together not just the question of what happens to Menno, but the far more important question: what is God's intention for this church? It is a project that no single gut can accomplish by itself, nor should it and we might be surprised by the results.

There is documentation from Menno Simons of the prayer life he had when he was considering stepping into leadership of the emerging Anabaptist movement. He wrote that his

prayer was “that God make this burn in me that I may do no other”. That prayer was his way of laying out the fleece to test whether this step into the unknown was really what was intended for him, for his life. I, too, know some of that was too. It took me a long time to decide that, even after the training of seminary that I wanted to be a pastor. Faced by the realistic prospect of not being able to find a place willing to call me, I had to decide whether I was willing to take the risk of stepping up in the first place. I remember praying that if this was something realistic for me, that I might find confirmation in the shape of finding the inspiration to complete the daunting Ministerial Leadership Inventory before a date I had set myself. I asked that the doors would open if this was an option I was to pursue. Suffice it to say that following that bargain of sorts, the energy was there and did find me in far bigger ways than I could imagine. That was far from the end of the test, further still from the end of doubt—that never really goes away. But it was an initial confirmation that this was indeed something of God and not just of my personal ambition.

All of this seems way up here in the sky, but I really don’t mean it to be. As well as we enjoy our guts—the internal feelings we steer ourselves by, we are invited, always, into seeking that which God wills for us. There is no guarantees of easy response or spoken clear messages of “choose A and not B” (though who know), but there is something to it. Take a risk. Ask God’s opinion on something. Test a decision. Seek God’s will. In doing so, you may be amazed by what you find and where it leads.

May the God who answers all prayers rest with you, call to you and bring you to new life.
Amen.