

"WHEN GOD SPEAKS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
March 3, 1996

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INTRODUCTION

Young Ben's family was quite active in a church that put great emphasis on a personal commitment to Christ. Even though he was only seven years old, Ben had already heard much talk about the importance of surrendering one's life to Christ. And so, one morning at the breakfast table, little seven year old Ben announced that he, too, was ready to give his life to Christ and with that he got up from the table and went upstairs to his room. His mother and father exchanged glances and then decided to follow young Ben to his room. They thought they might find him on his knees in prayer, but they didn't. Instead, upon opening his bedroom door, they found him folding his Star Wars pajamas into his Sesame Street suitcase. They asked,

"Ben....what are you going?" He replied, "Packing".
"Why?" they asked. "To go to heaven" was his answer.

In Ben's young mind, giving one's life to Christ was no small step. It meant the willingness to leave his family and travel immediately to be with Christ.

DEVELOPMENT

Thinking about this account as told by Ben's mother, I was reminded of that Old Testament figure, Abraham. And the picture we get of Abraham is that of a man with the same kind of complete and unreserved faith in God that little seven year old Ben had. And I like it!

Our story begins 1800 years before the birth of Christ with a man seventy-five years old. His name was Abram and he lived in a region of a country that today is known as Iraq. And what made Abram one of the most unique men who has ever lived and walked on this earth is this:

"God spoke to him and he believed God and he left his family and immediately set out to a new land which God would give him."

Have you ever wondered just how God spoke to Abraham? Was it a clear and audible voice? Would we have heard that voice if we had been nearby? Was it a dream? Was it in a still, small quiet voice within his own heart? Did God give him some kind of a sign - a flashing green light? I've often wondered just how God spoke to him...

And I ask that question because I am continually wondering if God is speaking to me. Don't you, too? I want to know if I am walking in God's will. I want to know if I am leading you...leading this Church where God wants it to go. I want to know if there are things God would have me do in order to make more of an impact on others with whatever gifts or graces He has given me. Just how does God speak to people?

The Biblical record is not that clear. Sometimes God seems to speak to people directly and then at other times through angels and still at other times through dreams. Every once in a while God seems to send some sign in order to seal the understanding and I suspect all of us have had those moments in our lives when God has seemed so close and we've experienced some rather mysterious event occur that spoke to us of God's very presence.....and we've been absolutely sure that we were standing right there in the very center of God's will.

Randy Rowland, in his book, Get A Life!, tells about such an event. It seems that he was at a very low point of his life. Depressed and discouraged, he had bill collectors calling him just about every day. It went like this,

"We need the seventy-five dollars for your gas bill".
"But I don't have seventy-five dollars" Randy would reply. They would insist, "You must give us seventy-five dollars, or else...."

He then goes on to tell a true story that he says he wouldn't have believed if he hadn't been there and witnessed the whole thing. Seems he was down to two pairs of shoes and one of them was a pair of hiking boots which rather mysteriously disappeared. At that time he was living with a family who had taken him in out of pure love. His monthly salary was about three hundred dollars less than his monthly list of bills. Things were bad. The four year old daughter of this family that had reached out to him came to him and sat on his lap and said,

"Have you prayed to Jesus that you'll get your boots back and that God will take care of your problems with money? Mom and dad said that's why you're so sad...."

Now...when a four year old asks you to pray to Jesus, says Randy, you do just that! And so Tina and her mom and Randy prayed a short prayer and Tina even prayed that God would bring back his boots. Only a few moments later, a huge dog walked into the yard with Randy's boots, tied together and hanging out of his mouth. The dog dropped them on the porch and turned and walked away. It was the neighbor's dog that lived up the road in this rural area. He apparently somehow had found Randy's boots, picked them up and brought them back to where they belonged and then gone about his business.

Randy Rowland adds,

"I told you it was a story that isn't easy to believe...but it happened....I kid you not."

I have no doubt that it happened, but how it happened is another thing. Was it merely a happy coincidence or was it a direct answer to prayer? We'll never know, of course....but I suspect that all of us have experienced such events in our lives. We may have interpreted them to mean that God was very close to us and that, yes...we were in the "center" of God's will. Of course, we have to be careful. There's no way of knowing such things for sure. People have done foolish things...sometimes horrible things...because they felt an event was a sign of God's special favor. How do we know God's will for our lives.

This leads me to ask another question.

A RATIONAL EXPLANATION: DOES IT LIMIT US?

I wonder....do we sometimes limit ourselves because we insist too strictly on a rational explanation for everything? At times, I'm tempted to say that we do!

I received a letter last week from the Evangelical National Methodist Church in Guatemala thanking us for a gift our church made to a program down there and asking for our prayers for that Church. It brought to mind a story told by Dr. Peter Wagner, in his book, Signs and Wonders, of a severe drought in the city of Santa Rosa in Guatemala. The year was 1965 and people were leaving that city. Businesses were going bankrupt. Crops were perishing. and animals were dying. Special efforts were being made to bring in water, but it was so scarce. Catholics were holding special masses. Evangelicals were holding prayer meetings. There was no rain. No water.

Then...it happened. In a small Pentecostal meeting, where some believers gathered for their regular worship service, the Spirit of the Lord moved in a mighty way. There was a message in tongues followed a few moments later by an interpretation which went like this:

"Dig a well in the pastor's backyard. And there you will find water. In the pastor's backyard!"

Well, there was a great deal of opposition from other churches as the deacons and the elders and the pastor with shovels in hand, began to dig! They thought these people were fanatics or were hallucinating, especially when they saw that the pastor's backyard was on a hill. A well would never be dug on a hill as the water runs low, but the deacons and the elders and the pastor and even his wife...kept on digging. Soon one of the deacons became quite upset and asked,

"Why couldn't it be in mine....why is it in the pastor's backyard?"

Another elder thought that perhaps the prophesy was biased. He left. Soon another deacon gave up and left. But there still remained a group that was faithful and so they pressed on. Because of the drought, the ground was hard, so the digging was slow and difficult. One day they encountered a big boulder. It was so large they thought they had hit solid rock, but they kept on digging...around it until after two days they were able to remove it. And, as they did, you know what happened? A gush of water came forth. It was rich and plenteous and they began to drink and drink and made merry. For many in that community, it was a sign - a remarkable sign of God's favor!

And what the miracle of the well did to the growth of that church carries on right down to this very day! Why the number of conversions to Christ has been staggering. Church membership has grown from a few dozen to well over nine hundred souls within a short period of time.

Was this a sign from God? And what shall we say about such an event. For most of us the answer will probably come to rest in those words, "Well, who knows?" And yes, who does know how God may choose to speak? I've often thought we may be limiting ourselves by our lack of faith and trust. And perhaps we do, at times, limit ourselves by requiring a rational and scientific explanation for everything. Really: who knows? Don't shut the windows and doors of your mind to those events that whisper to us of the world of the spirit. But there is another question that we need to consider and that is:

ARE WE LISTENING WHEN GOD SPEAKS

Are we listening when God does speak? Are we ready to hear what God may have to say?

There's a delightful story...granted perhaps a bit ridiculous....about a man who purchased a parrot and for years devoted much time and energy and money to get the parrot to talk. Oh, he read book after book on the subject, and even bought some long-playing records for the bird to listen to...hoping that all of this might encourage his pet parrot to talk, but nothing seemed to help. He finally got disgusted with the parrot and felt it was time to take him back to the pet store. As he crossed the street, he failed to see a car... coming right at them. The parrot saw the car and yelled, "LOOK OUT!" but the man didn't move fast enough and was knocked down to the ground by the car, but fortunately....he wasn't hurt...only slightly bruised. He got up and started muttering about...."that dumb parrot". Whereupon the parrot looked at him and said,

"Who's dumb? For five years you've tried to get me to talk and then when I do you won't listen!"

Listening is not what many of us do best. We are much better at talking than at listening..and we need to listen. Who was it who said: God gave us two ears and only one mouth! Write that one down and think about it.

Back in the nineteen-fifties the writers for the old Sid Caesar comedy show used to meet each day for lunch and to tell jokes. Naturally, they hardly listened to each other. They were too busy thinking of a story to top the one being told. One day, one of the writers came to the table late...and rather depressed and gloomy, said:

"Sorry guys. I can't stay long today, my mother died and I'm flying home for the funeral!"

And with that, one of his colleagues jumped right in and smiling at everyone said, "You think that's funny....listen to this one!"

Yes, some of us are not every good at listening. We'd rather do all the talking. Some of us are not very good at listening to God. I wonder...do you set aside a time each day to listen for the voice of God? Do you take your family to God, your work, your daily tasks, the people you associate with each day? Try it and see what happens. Do you take this Church to God and ask God's guidance in how you may help us be what God wants us to be in this place at this time. Is the problem one of God's speaking or is it one of our listening? Think about that...please.

I think it was Marshall McLuhan who once offered the observation that nature had not equipped us with earlids. We can close our eyes, but not our ears. And so McLuhan suggests that we compensate for nature's oversight by developing selective listening. We all do it. We listen to what we want to hear and I dare say that some of us are not listening to God.

How does God speak to us? And do we limit ourselves by our lack of faith? Do we limit ourselves by our failure to listen? But there is one more question that must be asked here this morning before we adjourn and go our way.

ARE WE WILLING TO ACT WHEN GOD DOES SPEAK?

Are we willing to act when God does speak to us? Now we're getting down to the "nitty-gritty". This may be the real problem in our lives. It is not that we don't know God's will. It just may be that we are unwilling to act on the part of God's will that we do know!

I confess to you that there are a number of things in my own life that I believe to be God's will for me, but acting on what I already know to be "from God" is one of my biggest problems and one of my greatest obstacles. Do you know what I mean?

Some time back, Sports Illustrated, published a profile of Bill McCartney, who had just resigned from his position as football coach of the University of Colorado. Some of you may remember it. McCartney, 54 years of age and the founder of Promise Keepers, that fast-growing Christian men's movement, quit coaching, he said, in order to spend more time...with his wife! The authors of this article struggled to understand and asked this question:

"What man gives up such power and such prestige...or put another way...what man 'walks out' on a \$ 350,000 per-year contract with 10 years remaining so that he can spend time with his wife...and with God?"

McCartney, I understand, draws no salary from Promise Keepers and that's important because many people tend to be a bit cynical about those who lead such Christian movements.

Writing about that article in Sports Illustrated Luis Palau notes that throughout this article the authors used such terms as radical, consumed, out of his head...and of course, religious zealot. Evidently, Palau comments, the zeal that is such an asset for a football coach is considered something of a liability for people with spiritual inclinations. In other words, a little bit of God is acceptable...and travels a long ways...but a determination to seek God's will at all costs makes one an extremist. I guess we'd have to say that Abraham was a bit of extremist. Abraham heard God's voice speaking to him He listened. He believed and even more importantly, he set out to do what God had called him to do.

CLOSING

How do you feel about it...really? And what about yourself?

Is God speaking to you about some area in your life....some relationship, perhaps....or some habit, some obsession, some responsibility? We are not accountable for knowing God's will perfectly....I suppose we will always, as Paul put it, see through a glass darkly...dimly....the question we are accountable to answer is: are we acting on what we do know to be God's will for our lives? And like little seven year old Ben with whom we started this sermon....are we packing our bags for a closer walk with Christ who continues to be for each of us, "the way, the truth and the life". Think about as we commune and let us pray together:

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments as we feel the deepest things in us being stirred up.... that down below the surface of our lives, we feel Your spirit striving to bring forth the highest and the best we are meant to be. Wrestle with us even as You wrestled long ago with Abraham, with others...with Jesus, with Paul.

Visit our sick with the deep assurance of Your care. Encircle the bereaved with your love and care. Point our markers along the trail for those who have lost their way. The race is so short, even at its longest and we would try to run it well and always to Your glory. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray.

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Visit our sick with the deep assurance of Your care. Encircle the bereaved with your love and care. Point our markers along the trail for those who have lost their way. The race is so short, even at its longest and we would try to run it well and always to Your glory. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray.