

“Who Says, ‘God Says,’”?
Isaiah 6:1-8 (Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord sending him.)
Genesis 16:6-11 (It is said that God tells Hagar to return to her masters.)

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September 19, 2010
Redlands First United Methodist Church

At times the question, “What is God saying?” can almost be humorous. Yet, sometimes we question with deep seriousness; we are searching to hear God’s voice with all of our might. We may be stuck or on the verge of a decision and desperately yearning for divine guidance.

Thinking of our approach to the end of summer this week, I’m starting this sermon with two stories about things that happened at swimming pools. One of the stories is about events that occurred in Ohio a while ago; the other story is about an event that happened just last Sunday at Family Camp in Idyllwild.

First story: At the community swimming pool where our family went when our children were young, I used to try to relax. I would lie on a lounge chair, put a hat over my face, and enjoy the warmth. There was a lot of sound—plenty of children who were yelling, laughing, having fun, and there was piped in music, too. Yet, I could easily tune all that out, as I just lay there, relaxed.

Then, out of all that background noise, I would hear one particular voice, “Mom, Mom, look, Mom.” Should I take off my hat, sit up, and look, just to make sure that it was not my child calling, or should I just relax? Of course, no matter which course of action I took, I could no longer relax.

After a couple months struggling with this dilemma, I came up with a solution that seemed odd to my children, but they were willing to oblige me, for they benefited from having a relaxed mom. My solution: I asked them to yell, if they wanted *me* to watch, “Carolyn, Carolyn, look, Carolyn.”

Frankly, I have asked God to do the same thing. I asked God to yell, when God wanted something, “Carolyn, Carolyn, please do this....” However, God has not obliged as clearly. I still have difficulty knowing whether it is God’s voice when I feel inclined to do (or not to do) something.

Second story: Last Saturday in Idyllwild, Theresa Palmer and Suzi Derby were sitting on the side of the swimming pool at Family Camp. Theresa was watching her daughters swim and Suzi was watching her granddaughter. Theresa had just said to Suzi something to the effect that she wouldn’t be of much use if she needed to rescue someone. Then, a woman came up to the two of them and pleaded: “Would one of you save my son . . . he can’t swim.” A boy who seemed to be just splashing around was actually in difficulty, not knowing how to get to the side. Instantly Theresa jumped into the water and lifted the boy out. Theresa didn’t really have to swim--the water wasn’t that deep, but Theresa, in street clothes, reacted instantly and rescued the boy.

Did God speak at the Idyllwild pool? Did God encourage Theresa and Suzi to sit on the side of the pool in order to watch their children? Did God nudge them to have “saving” someone on their minds? Did God say to Theresa in that instant, “Go! Grab the boy!”?

Our biblical excerpt shows that Isaiah seemed to *know* that God was calling him; at least it is reported that way. Isaiah experienced an amazing and bizarre vision which led Isaiah to respond: "Here I am, Lord! Send me."

In the other passage, Hagar, who was the maidservant of Abraham and Sarah, searched to hear God, too.

Her story is not well known, so I'll share it briefly. Abraham and Sarah were married, and they had no children. They needed offspring to carry on their rule, so Sarah told her husband to mate with their maidservant, Hagar. It seemed as if Sarah's own status would increase if Abraham had a child. However, once Hagar became pregnant, Sarah had a change of heart and treated Hagar harshly. Hagar ran away, into the desert, where she found a bountiful spring of water. *It is written* that God found her there and communicated to her, through an angel. The angel of **God is said to have said**, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her."

Did God, or God, through an angel, say to Hagar, "Return to Sarah and submit to her?" It is said, right here in the *Bible*, that God's angel did say that. I ask you, "**Who says, 'God says to Hagar, Return and submit?'**"

Who writes history? Who wrote this account of the Bible? Those who rule usually explain what is and how things came to be. Very rarely is history, even historical narratives in the Bible, written by slaves and maidservants. Sometimes we have found diaries or poems written on scratch pieces of paper from those who are powerless in a culture. More often, those with the greatest power explain history or revise it later.

I confess to you that I am not completely certain that God or God's angel called Hagar's name and told her to return to the harsh treatment that she had received under Abraham and Sarah. I am not so sure God would do that.

It is not unusual for women and a few men to go to shelters for battered persons saying that the one who injured them said, "God said to do this." I cannot believe God would tell anyone to hurt another person.

Sometimes, with entirely kind and loving motives a person will tell a significant other that **God has told them to marry them**. A seminary student came to me once with a predicament. Twice in his life thus far he had fallen in love with a woman and been told by God to marry that woman. When he proposed, he told the women this. They each said, "No" to his God-inspired proposals. I advised this student to speak more for himself than for God. Women might understand him better that way.

The more *absolutely certain* someone is that God is telling them to do something, especially something that involves another person, the more cautious I am that for sure it is God speaking. I believe someone more if they say they are **trying to discern** what to do, and are **inclined to think that perhaps** God is leading them to a particular decision.

There have been times when I believed that I was guided to do or not do something, and was inclined to think that God--or who knows, an angel?--was guiding me. However, even at those times God's voice was not as clear as my children's at the pool.

As the story of Hagar proceeds, her son Ishmael prospers...and Hagar's last act that is named in the Bible is that she helps her son to get an Egyptian wife, guaranteeing that the descendents would be Egyptians and therefore safe.

Most of Hagar's story is quite sad. Hebrew biblical scholar Phyllis Tribble talks of Hagar as a "symbol of the oppressed." "Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most especially, all sorts of rejected [women] find their stories in her."¹

I have a difficult time believing that God wants someone to suffer abuse or to suffer at the hands of another; therefore, when I am told that God tells someone to submit to that kind of behavior, I say, "Who says, 'God says'"? It just may be that the one who says, "God says," may have a stake in what someone thinks God is saying.

Some of you know that one of my heroes is Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was a priest in El Salvador. He was appointed to be the Archbishop at a very difficult time politically. In a compiled autobiography of Romero, I was struck with a particular scene: In the middle of the difficult situations in El Salvador, Romero talked with the priests who knew the people and asked the priests "Tell me. Tell me, all of you. What should I do to be a good bishop?" "It's easy, Monsignor," ... "What you should do is . . . spend six days in the countryside among the [workers] and just one day here (having meetings). Then you'll be a good bishop!" In other words, the priests believed that Romero would be more likely to **discern God's voice** if he talked with the poorest, the laborers.²

These priests who worked in solidarity with the workers told the workers that they, the priests, did not believe that it was the will of God that the workers be treated miserably. **The priests basically said, "Who says 'God says' you should suffer so much?"**

Occasionally we are as sure as Isaiah was that God wants us to do such and such. We can boldly say, as he did, "Here I Am, God! Send me!"

Yet many times when we need to make a decision or when we get caught up in a storm of conflict, we spend some time in the wilderness like Hagar. We feel almost desperate for clear guidance from God. Just this week I have prayed, "I'm stuck, God. What should I do?" Friends may say, "You should do this," or even, "God would want you to do that." Yet we ourselves must gain clarity. We need to know, "God is this *your* voice?"

I have been deeply grateful over the years to be guided by those asking such questions. I have learned that there are some good criteria for us, as we try to discern God's guidance. In general we are wise to consult with others, not to decide completely alone. Others may be able to help us to see from a bigger perspective, to see potential good for all.

How can we tell what God is saying to us?

1. Sometimes in relationships, in discussions, we gain a clue. People are helpful!
2. Sometimes our body keeps telling us something. It's excited or bored or healthy or sick and is communicating something. Pay attention to our bodies!
3. Sometimes we have what we call intuition or even a dream, which might be at least a clue, an inspired message?
4. One of the best ways to gain a clue what God might be saying is to try to look at the situation from as big a perspective as possible, seeing how others will be affected, not wanting harm, wanting to maximize good. This taking a very big perspective is a form of prayer, really. Humbly, joyously, and lovingly, we might, from this larger perspective, come to some clarity about what to do.

Maybe it's to propose to someone; maybe it's to say I'm sorry; maybe it's to stay the course or to change directions.

It just may be possible that God might have been speaking through the multitude of voices from all religions this week, as the pastor in Gainesville changed his mind and discerned a much bigger perspective.

We come to our decisions, as close to knowing it is God calling as we can get.

But we will never be absolutely sure it's God speaking. That's humbling, perhaps, but it can also be empowering.

May we keep asking God to call our name. May we keep listening. May we keep consulting with colleagues and friends and even especially people with whom we would not usually consult. May we challenge (inwardly if not aloud) anyone who tells us "God says you should." They may be right, but not for sure. May we pay attention, and may we, like Isaiah, Romero, Jesus, Hagar, Theresa . . . act as best we can, based on what we figure **God most likely might be saying, knowing that a week from now or even in the next minute, we may change, and go another direction.**

We are together, close together, as we search for God's voice as we seek to support one another.

¹ Tribble, Phyllis, *Texts of Terror*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984, "She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying on handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others"—p. 28

Another wonderful theologian, Delores S. Williams, wrote *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, a theology from a Black Woman's perspective, identifying with Hagar. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

² Maria Lopez Vigil, Oscar Romero: *Memories in Mosaic. Ecumenical Program on Central America & the Caribbean* (EPICA), Washington DC, USA, 2000.