



**QUESTIONS FOR GOD PREACHING SERIES
"VOICE LESSONS"**

**SCRIPTURE: EZEKIEL 2: 1-5; 2 CORINTHIANS 12: 2-10
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
July 8, 2018**

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Ezekiel 2:1-5

2:1 He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you.

2:2 And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me.

2:3 He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day.

2:4 The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD."

2:5 Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

12:2 I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows.

12:3 And I know that such a person--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows--

12:4 was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

12:5 On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.

12:6 But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me,

12:7 even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to

keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.

12:8 Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me,

12:9 but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

12:10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

Question 1 (Richard): When can I know that God (or Spirit) is speaking to me? (put orange card in the basket)

Question 2 (Marcia): How does God speak to so many people who don't believe he even exists? (put orange card in the basket)

Question 3 (Richard): What does God need me to do? (put orange card in the basket)

Reggie White was one of the best defensive players to ever play the game of football. He was also an ordained Baptist minister. After playing in the USFL in the early 1980s until the league folded, he played 8 seasons for the Philadelphia Eagles, playing in the pro-bowl every single season.

After winning a court case, White and some other players ushered in the era of unrestricted free agency. Players now had more power. Teams had to market themselves. It changed the NFL.

Reggie White was highly sought after in that first season of free agency (1993) and he made it clear that he wanted to play for a team where he could build an active inner city ministry. So, Green Bay Wisconsin was not at the top of Reggie's list. Green Bay is a small metropolitan area by any comparison, pretty much all white.

John and I knew Green Bay's head coach, Mike Holmgren, when John coached for the Bears. In fact, Mike's daughter, Emily, who lived in Chicago, babysat baby Sidney a few times a week while I took Greek at North Park University in Chicago.

John once asked Mike how in the world they got Reggie White to come to Green Bay in 1993. Mike said Reggie had said in the press that he would go where God told him to go. So, Mike called Reggie and left a message in the best God voice he could muster: "Reggie, this is God. Come to Green Bay."

And he did! I am sure the \$17 million they offered made God's voice sound even more compelling. And apparently God really wanted him at Green Bay, since Reggie later said that a friend also said to him: "God told me to tell you not to worry about your ministry. Go to Green Bay."¹

While in Green Bay, Reggie was asked to speak to the Wisconsin state legislature where he famously squeezed in just about every racial slur and homophobic statement you could squeeze into an hour-long speech.

Years later he expressed regret for some of his statements and even moved away from his religious practice and began studying Hebrew and the history of Christianity to discover what religion was really all about, before he died suddenly in 2004.²

God is always speaking, singing, calling, calming, troubling, naming, claiming, seeking. Do we have the ears to hear? How do we protect ourselves from the different ways our hearing is impaired?

Around the same time Mike Holmgren appropriated God's voice to land a great player, Ron and Dan Lafferty, fundamentalist Mormons in Utah, got a clear message from God written on a piece of paper to Ron. God's message was that they needed to kill their sister in law, Brenda, and their 15- month old niece, Erica.³

It was a brutal double murder in 1984 that shook the Mormon faith. The trial lasted years and was a disturbing testimony to the dangerous ways God's voice is seized for unspeakable violence.

Dan Lafferty maintained for decades after the murders that he was not guilty of a crime because Brenda's and Erica's deaths were God's will.

"I've always been interested in God and the Kingdom of God," Dan said. He continued, "Someone took me by the hand and led me comfortably through everything that happened. Ron had received a revelation from God that these lives were to be taken. I was the one who was supposed to do it. And if God wants something to be done, it will be done. You don't want to offend Him by refusing to do His work."⁴

The story of these murders is chillingly told in Jon Krakauer's book, *Under the Banner of Heaven*. I challenge any person of faith to read that book and not be rocked to the core.

The question it forces is the one we fear the most as believers—can we ever really hear God's voice or is it always a dangerous projection of our own desires, our own agendas?

Reading the book left me shaken about what the nature of revelation actually is. Is there any such thing as a trustworthy human connection to God's voice that does not leave us vulnerable to the violent delusions like the ones that drove the Lafferty brothers to murder?

I vowed never to let this question become facile or lie fallow for me—but to keep it at the fore of my struggle to be a Jesus follower. Being a part of multiple communities and cultivating relationships with people across faiths and cultures and beliefs has always been crucial to my faith. And an ongoing, careful and critical conversation with scripture also keeps me challenged, encouraged, and humbled.

Ezekiel hears God's voice and cannot stand. He says NOTHING—he listens.

Ezekiel and his people are a part of a mass deportation because their country was occupied. And in the midst of that trauma of exile, Ezekiel is called by God to tell his people that they have been stubborn, they have been disobedient to God, they have not held up their end of the bargain, they have been idolatrous, they have oppressed the people they were supposed to protect. Ezekiel tells them there are consequences for that behavior.

That's a tough message to have to deliver in such a dire situation. But Ezekiel does not waver. His priority is his relationship with God and making sure his people did not fall into the trap of blaming God for what was happening to them. According to Ezekiel they had no one but themselves to blame.

And Ezekiel, like all the Hebrew prophets, was not a happy person or the life of the party—his job was a hard one. He was at turns mute and at other times compulsively dug holes in the walls of houses. He heard voices and the sound of running water. He saw strange creatures.

Being a prophet was not a cool job—something all the little kids wanted to grow up and do. It was a painful task. And the prophets of our faith were 100% reluctant prophets.

So, beware of prophets who are busy comforting themselves and those like them. Beware of prophets who say God's voice is telling them they can do no wrong. The

true prophets of our faith struggle and cry out and even ask God to find someone else for the job.

Paul was a recovering zealot who had, as a Jewish official, let faith become his license to brutalize and demean. Struck blind and helpless on the Damascus road, Paul was humbled and he was transformed.

His resulting passion for Jesus was zealous, no doubt, but he became a man who knew how to stay in difficult relationships instead of annihilate his opponents. Paul's world got bigger, his heart and his capacity to translate across cultures grew stronger.

There is so much here to teach us about the kind of bold humility that following Jesus faithfully requires and cultivates within us.

Paul had a close relationship with the Corinthian church and felt a deep sense of responsibility for their spiritual integrity. They disappointed Paul over and over again.

These last few chapters of what we call 2 Corinthians is probably actually a fragment from a fifth letter to this community of faith from Paul.

Paul had visited the church and been verbally assaulted by one of the members. No one had come to his aid. A lost letter of Paul to Corinth preceded what we call 2 Corinthians. It was a frank letter about their moral failures.

He wrote this fifth letter when their relationship was on the line.

Paul talks about the thorn in the flesh that has kept him grounded and humbled. It has kept him from feeling high and mighty from all the revelations and visions he has received. It taught him about Christ's power, alive in our weakness.

What a beautiful way to orient ourselves to the thorns in our sides—the things that challenge us the most, the things that threaten to destroy us, to discourage us, to isolate and insult us. These thorns are not impediments to trustworthy revelation; they are prerequisites, because they keep us from becoming distorted by our own interpretations and pridefulness, and our own agendas.

Paul's poignant description of the way God uses our weakness to magnify Christ's power to heal is a golden thread for us to hold on to in the face of the chilling reality of so-called revelation that violates, destroys, and demeans. God's voice expands and heals; God's voice takes hard situations and turns them toward cultivating truth, toward cultivating the good.

How do we protect ourselves from mistaking the voices of hatred, judgment, entitlement, and privilege for God's voice? How do we embrace the thorns that keep us humble at the same time we say yes to God's call to proclaim Christ's Good News boldly?

What voice lessons do we get from Reggie, Dan, Ron, Ezekiel and Paul?

Their stories could easily conspire to force our hand—maybe even bring us to the conclusion that God's voice is a farce, a human imaginary.

These stories could easily lead us to resolve to be silent so as to avoid the inevitable distortions our voices will deliver.

Many have rejected organized religion for just that reason. And I don't blame them really. So much violence, so many horrendous things have been done in God's name, boasting of God's vocal seal of approval.

What makes us different? What does God need from us? And how in the world can we ever really know if we are getting this right?

Krakauer ends his book with these words:

"I don't know what God is, or what God had in mind when the universe was set into motion. In fact, I don't know if God even exists...

There are some ten thousand extant religious sects—each with its own cosmology, each with its own answer for the meaning of life and death. Most assert that the other 9,999 not only have it completely wrong but are instruments of evil, besides. None of the ten thousand has yet persuaded me to make the requisite leap of faith. In the absence of conviction, I've come to terms with the fact that uncertainty is an inescapable corollary in life. An abundance of mystery is simply part of the bargain...

And if I remain in the dark about our purpose here, and the meaning of eternity, I have nevertheless arrived at an understanding of a few more modest truths: Most of us fear death. Most of us yearn to comprehend how we got here, and why—which is to say, most of us ache to know the love of our creator. And we will no doubt feel that ache, most of us, for as long as we happen to be alive."⁵

We can't fault Krakauer for arriving where he did—at a place where no revelation could be compelling any longer because of God's vulnerability to being abused and deployed for such deadly purposes.

As those who remain people of faith in the face of such sobering realities, fundamentalism is a thorn in our side—and like Paul, that thorn challenges and chastens us and it keeps us from becoming too elated from visions, calls, and wisdom God is placing in the hearts of this community. Fundamentalism keeps us honest. And it keeps us focused—because for us being right is not the goal. We are not out to win a truth contest or annihilate our opponents, we are seeking after healing for humanity’s deepest wounds—and those are wounds that we know afflict us as well.

The mystery and uncertainty do not lead me to abandon my faith, they lead me deeper into faith’s mysterious beauty. God’s healing love is not something I can prove or even often describe with any precision. I know it by the impact it has had on me my whole life long.

God calls me to boldly and humbly share Christ’s love as best I can, with all the trial, travail, doubt, and darks nights of the soul that come along in such a daunting task. And this I believe:

- God’s voice will not make your world get smaller, but bigger.
- God’s voice will call you to trust sacred moments, even when you’ve been betrayed and have every reason not to trust.
- God’s voice will not command you to annihilate another, but God’s voice may call you to speak hard truth to another.
- God takes the thorns in our sides and turns them to a healing, vital purpose.
- In our weakness and vulnerability is Christ’s power to heal.
- When you learn to stop talking you will find your God-given voice.

Don’t let the way God’s voice can be kidnapped for hatred and harm silence the music that Spirit is singing to the world—freedom songs, love songs, songs of friendship and redemption, songs of justice and joy.

Prayer for revelation:

Christ light shine
glow
illuminate
expose
wash us in love and compassion
humility and peace.

Divine spark

Kindle us to your refining fire
Ignite us with imagination that
sees, feels, knows no violence,
no harm, no hate

Spirit wind

Scatter our idols, our fears, our grasping, our lethargy
whisper your wisdom
fill us with common breath
Billow the sails of our best possibilities.

Light, spark, wind of life and work, rest and tender release,
take brutality and terror and
dissolve it
in your wonderful wash of deep ocean
its only remnant, regret that gifts memories
and careful moments together.⁶

Thanks be to God.

¹ I was delighted to find this article in my sermon preparation that filled in more details about Reggie

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/29/sports/football/tributes-to-reggie-white-show-incomplete-picture.html>

³ Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*. (Random House, 2003).

⁴ Ibid, XXI

⁵ Ibid, 340-341.

⁶ Marcia Mount Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ*. (WJKP, 2010)