

Homily - 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Have you ever heard the voice of God?

This is one of those questions where we quickly realize there’s a tension between the spiritual life of prayer and the normal conventions of the world.

To put it another way, if you were to walk around town telling people in an unqualified way that you were hearing voices, they probably wouldn’t assume you were holy.

More likely they’d be assuming something else.

But the fact remains that not only does our faith have a strong tradition of people receiving communication from the Lord, I would go so far as to say that it’s actually expected as part of our growth in prayer.

And regardless of how the idea of ‘hearing voices’ sounds to you, I think it’s also fair to say that many of us, even people who observe little if any regular practice of their faith, still have some fundamental idea that God can and will communicate with us.

How often have you heard someone say they had experienced or looked for what they thought was a “sign from God”?

It’s actually quite common, but the problem is, of course, that very few people have ever had any instruction in how to hear and recognize the way that God speaks to us.

That story from the first book of Samuel is a classic model of that kind of experience, where the voice of God is confused with the merely human experiences and voices that surround us, or more often, missed entirely.

Even Samuel, who would become one of the greatest of the prophets, needed instruction and mentorship to learn to discern the voice of God.

So too for us.

The Lord's voice is unlike any other, and until we grow into a close relationship with him, it can indeed be easily ignored or confused with the many other thoughts and forces that shape our minds.

So, rather than simply give you an abstract explanation, at the risk of being self-centered, it might make more sense if I tell you about my own experience hearing the Lord's voice.

One of the first times I can definitively say I experienced the Lord speaking to me was on September 9th, 2011, on retreat with the Catholic Campus Ministry at the College of William and Mary.

This retreat came at a pivotal time for me - I had just arrived at the campus as a new student, and just signed up for my major, but had no clear plan or direction about where my life was going or what I would do with my future.

But I knew, from having experienced a radical experience of personal conversion and deepening of my own faith that summer, that God seemed to care about what I was doing in my life.

And so, that evening in Eucharistic Adoration, I started praying through and imagining some of those ideas for the future.

I thought through places I could live, jobs I could have - and none of them felt satisfying, or right.

Until, that is, out of nowhere, I imagined myself dressed like a priest - a life I'd never seriously considered at any point before - and thought, "Or... you could go to seminary."

In that moment, I felt a deep, abiding sense of peace - something that I knew was not from my own mind or desires.

And the reason I *knew* it wasn't my own invention was because a few seconds later, I freaked out.

I did *not* want to be a priest - and yet I knew without a shadow of a doubt it was the right thing.

The great spiritual master, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, gives us a classic list of what he calls his rules for the discernment of spirits, guidelines for how to distinguish the voice of God from the temptations that come our way, and how to respond if we're going through fruitful or difficult times in our spiritual lives.

He writes in his third rule, "I call consolation every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord."

That was what I experienced: not literal words, but a very distinct grace of peace that pointed me in the right direction, like the beacon of a lighthouse cutting through the fog of my soul.

That peace, and many other subtle interior promptings and movements, are the most typical and characteristic ways that the Lord will draw us to himself and give us direction in times of discernment.

And, again, to recognize these movements and graces, we have to be very deliberate about setting aside the space, time, and attention for prayer and reflection so that his voice isn't drowned out in the middle of the activity of life.

Can he break through that noise if he wants to? Yes - but remember that one of the ways he shows us his love is by respecting our free will.

The Lord invites us, but he will rarely force us to listen, because, as we know, authentic love cannot be compelled.

But what if we simply cannot seem to experience those graces?

What if our relationship to God feels dead and lifeless, and we haven't really prayed in a long time, or ever?

Often, the Lord is speaking in that dynamic as well, but in a different kind of way.

As I said, that first experience of a call to my vocation came at a pivotal time in my life, and it followed a different experience of grace at a Catholic conference a couple of months earlier.

There, the experience of God's call was more painful - a realization that while the Lord was there with me in the sacraments, I really needed to make some changes in my life.

That was a different kind of grace, but it moved me to return to the sacrament of Confession, and cleared the space in my heart for the discernment that would take place later on.

Saint Ignatius writes in his first rule that for people who have not yet rejected serious sin, God's voice can speak through more uncomfortable means. As he writes, "In these persons the good spirit uses the opposite method, pricking them and biting their consciences through the process of reason."

This is what I'd call the 'good' kind of Catholic Guilt - the Lord is really inviting us to make a serious change, reject sin, and get back on the right path.

And yes, it can be uncomfortable to start - but sometimes that's what we need, right?

I share my own experiences not because they're exceptional or because everyone will go through something exactly the same, but rather just as a real example of the different dynamics of how the Lord may be calling us to himself.

But however he speaks, the attitude of our response should be the same as Samuel's: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

That's holy docility - trusting that if the Lord invites us to follow him, he does so to lead us to a greater joy and freedom.

So let's pay attention.

Learn to listen for the voice of God.

Let him draw you nearer to his heart, and renew you in his love.

Don't overthink it, and when questions arise, turn to the wisdom and guidance of the Church, where the light of faith will always show us the way forward.

We pray as we continue this Mass that the Lord will give us this clarity to know his will, the wisdom to recognize his voice, and the strength to follow him to the end of our lives, and beyond.