

Did God Talk to You?

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Exploratory Weekend: Fall 2016
Text: St. Mark 10: 46-52

Gary Larson has a cartoon. God is pictured enthroned among the clouds. He is on the telephone.

“Hello? Hello? This is God! Who’s this?”

“Uh, this is Ernie Miller, sir.”

“Ernie who? Is this 555-1728?”

“No sir. This is 555-1782.”

“Sorry.” Click.

The caption reads: *“And for the rest of his life, Ernie told his friends that he had talked with God.”*

Recently this cartoon has come to mind because I have been thinking about a conversation my son, Jeremy, and I had almost twenty years ago now. Since that conversation, Jeremy has experienced some significant changes in his life. He thought he was headed for the practice of law or maybe finance, but he found himself called to ministry after college and an MBA. Just last week I had the privilege of presenting the charge to him at his installation as Executive Pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. The changes of direction in his life were prefigured years ago.

Jeremy and I were walking across the fields at our family farm in Deep East Texas. Jeremy was a teenager. We’d been getting in some target practice beneath the dam of the old pond. Our shotguns were breached as we walked along. We were enjoying one of those moments when the tumblers seem to fall into place.

Jeremy asked, *“Dad, did God talk to you?”*

I was surprised. I don’t remember what we had been talking about. But we hadn’t been talking about God at the time.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know, when God called you to be a preacher. Did you hear God’s voice?”

“Well,” I stammered, “Yeah. Sort of. Not in a voice like we’re talking in right now. But I remember a sense of God’s presence, an awareness dawning on me as though Christ stood right in front of me and called me to follow him. At first I tried to ignore it. But that didn’t work. It almost felt as if everybody in our church had been told before I had that God was calling me. Yeah. God talked to me.”

“That must have scared the #@%&!!! out of you!” (We can’t say today what Jeremy said got scared out of me).

“Yeah,” I said, “It did. It still does. But, even at those times when I doubted the existence of God, I knew God had called me to follow Christ.”

I think, in some ways, this has been the central question for my whole life. Maybe for most of us.

“*Did God talk to me?*” If God *did* talk to me, then, even the other big questions like, “Who am I?” and “What am I here for?” fall into place.

Like Jacob we find ourselves named by moments of mystery, by presences that will not be controlled. We’re named, like babies wet from the baptismal fount. We’re named: *One who talks with God*. And, having been named this, we know what we were created for.

How many times have I heard someone say: “I just wish God would let me know what God wants of me”? Or “Why doesn’t God communicate with us as clearly as God communicated with the people in the times of the Bible?”

You know what I’ve come to believe? God does communicate with us today just as clearly as God communicated with the people in the Bible.

I’m not saying that God is all that clear in communicating with us now. I’m saying it has always been puzzling and ambiguous to talk with God.

We don’t get a feeling for just how ambiguous God’s messages are, of course, watching those reverent biblical epics. At the movies, when Jesus speaks to a crowd, the clouds rumble with divine special effects, lights glow, music swells.

Moses may not want to believe it, but in the movie, “The Ten Commandments,” he cannot deny that God is speaking to him from the burning bush.

When Jesus is crucified, in the movie “The Robe,” everybody knows this is no ordinary day. You can’t miss the signals.

But we don’t find this kind of clarity in either the biblical witness or in everyday life.

Take our text today. Mark has a story to tell to the nations. But it’s not the story we’re expecting. Mark is about to tell us the story of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. That’s where his gospel has been headed from the very first lines.

Mark is telling us that however painful, however shocking the passion of Jesus is, it is *not* a tragic detour down a dead-end street. The death of Jesus is where the messianic life leads in this world.

Before Mark tells us about the passion of Jesus, however, he gives us the most remarkable description in all the Bible of what it means to follow Jesus. Stretching over nearly three chapters, beginning with the healing of a man born blind and closing with the healing of blind Bartimaeus, Mark tells us: *If we want to become followers of Jesus, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus, for those who would save their lives will lose them, and those who will lose their lives for the sake of Jesus and his gospel will save them, for what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose his own soul.*

In these three chapters:

- Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ. Then Peter is rebuked by Jesus for not understanding that the messiah *must* suffer, be rejected and be crucified.
- Peter, James and John witness the transfiguration, then want to build a retreat

center on top of the mountain in honor of their spiritual experience, then are told that the right response to this event is to shut-up and listen.

- James and John start a fight among the disciples over who is the greatest among them, only to be told by Jesus that greatness among his followers has to do with welcoming children, becoming servants and sharing his fate.
- A young man discovers that discipleship costs everything in life and the disciples discover that the *Who's Who* of the kingdom of God is at odds with their own social agenda.
- And dead-center of this whole collection of stories is another healing, the healing of a possessed child who is unable to speak and unable to hear; it's a healing that causes the disciples to ask Jesus, "*Why aren't we able to do the things you are able to do?*" And Jesus replies, "*It takes prayer.*"

Theologian Edward Schillebeekx has said that for Mark, "the regaining of sight ... becomes the model for true discipleship."

This is true, *in part*. But there's even more going on here. And to get at what else is going on in these chapters, we have to look closely at the last story, the story of the healing of blind Bartimaeus.

Jesus and the disciples passed through Jericho. And as Jesus, the disciples, and a large crowd trooped along the road out of town, they passed by a blind beggar, Bartimaeus sitting by the road.

When Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was passing by, he began to cry out, "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.*"

Here we have a man so desperately poor he doesn't even own his own name. The narrator calls him Bartimaeus, but, Bar-Timaeus, literally just means Son of Timaeus. His whole identity is hidden in two words: *blind beggar*. That's all he is to those around him.

He calls out to Jesus. And the crowd silences him. They rebuke him sternly. This word for "rebuke" occurs repeatedly in this very tense passage of scripture. Everyone is rebuking everyone else. This is the same word that Peter uses when he rebukes Jesus and insists that messiahs don't suffer and die. This is the same word Jesus uses when he rebukes Peter, saying, "Get thee behind me, Satan."

The crowd is very harsh rebuking Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus occupies the status which society awards to the poor, the broken, the forgotten, the powerless, the marginalized.

Bartimaeus is a nobody to them. He has no power. Bartimaeus is of no use. He has no value. He has nothing. So they rebuke him sternly: "Hush! Shut up, Son of Timaeus!"

But Bartimaeus cries out *even more loudly*: "*Son of David, have mercy on me!*" He speaks with the voice of those who have nothing to lose. That is the social reality. But there's a personal reality here too. One child, the Son of Timaeus, calls to another child, the Son of David; one child, whose name leads from obscurity to obscurity, cries out to the child whose name leads from David's Jerusalem to Pilate's Jerusalem.

Jesus hears Bartimaeus. Jesus stops dead in his tracks. Jesus says: "*Call him here.*"

The crowd calls to Bartimaeus, “Well get up. He’s calling you. Hurry!”
Bartimaeus *springs* to his feet. He runs stumbling toward Jesus.

“*What do you want me to do for you,*” asks Jesus.
“My teacher, I want to see again,” Bartimaeus answers.

“My teacher.” What does it mean that this man who possesses nothing, claims this teacher as his own? “My teacher, I want to see again.” And Jesus says: “*Go. Your faith has made you well.*”

Immediately Bartimaeus regained his sight. And he follows Jesus on the way.

And we all say: “*Oh, if Jesus were to come to me in person, if Jesus were to say me, ‘follow me,’ I’d follow him.*”

But I wonder.

If Jesus had spoken to me on a street in Jericho, would I have perceived his voice as the voice of God? Would I have known and recognized that God was talking to me? Would I have followed him on the way?

In all these three chapters about discipleship in Mark’s Gospel, *this is the very first time we get an unreserved positive response to Jesus Christ*. Did you know that? *This is the first time we hear that someone without hesitation and without any restrictions or limitations has followed Jesus down the road that leads to Jerusalem.*

Bartimaeus: A blind man who has nothing of his own, no references, no profession, no wealth, no degrees, no status, no righteousness -- nothing to recommend him to the best society or the religious folk in his community.

He hears that Jesus is nearby. He cries out for *mercy*. He is healed. He sees Jesus. He follows Jesus. *And make no mistake about this: Bartimaeus does follow Jesus.*

This is the great insight that Mark has been leading us toward in his own cunning way. The biblical text here uses the same word “to follow” that it reserves for discipleship. Bartimaeus becomes a disciple, and he follows Jesus down the road that leads to Jerusalem.

What did Bartimaeus do that was *so* right?

Wouldn’t the Rich Young Ruler be a better prospect for church membership than Bartimaeus?

What’s so wrong with Peter, James and John building the Transfiguration Peak Center for Spirituality and Fitness?

Mark is toying with the reader to make his point. Who is really blind in this story? Who really wants to see? Is it the disciples who walk beside Jesus every day without getting it? The self-righteous religious leaders who confront Jesus in one town after another with their trick questions? The curious wealthy fellow who wants to “friend” Jesus on Facebook because it is the cool thing to do? Or an obscure man beside the road?

Thus that well-placed question from Jesus to Bartimaeus: “*What do you want me to do*

for you?”

And Bartimaeus answers straight-away, *“I want to see again.”*

Something extraordinary happens in this text in the way that Bartimaeus vanishes almost as soon as he appears. His disappearance is not an accident in Mark’s Gospel.

Bartimaeus is so important to Mark’s Gospel, as the epitome of real discipleship, that Mark will never mention him again.

Bartimaeus becomes the greatest disciple because he is least and last. Bartimaeus serves the gospel of Jesus Christ by disappearing. His identity is swallowed up in the call to follow. His name becomes, *“One who talked with God.”*

So, I have a question for you today. It’s not really my question. It is the question posed by a teenager who is trying to understand discipleship. And he wants to know: “Did God talk to you?”