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# TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

God is not silent by Paul Williams

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> November 2022

There is a book sitting on my bookshelf by Francis Schaeffer with the title “He is there, and He is not silent.” It’s some years since I delved into it, but in some ways my memory of the title was the inspiration for the theme of today. In my last message I attempted to address the first part of the title “He is there”. Today is part 2: “He is not silent”.

I love the message that Margaret sometimes puts in the in the OOS: “God may be calling you but probably not on your cell phone.” It also fits well with today’s message which is about how God speaks to us. When I was reading over my notes I was struck by those words “God speaks to us”. The notion that God may want to speak to us on a personal level is really quite amazing.

I want to start with a few rhetorical questions.

Do we believe God speaks to us?

To us individually?

To us as a Church?

How does God speak to you?

I’ve recently discovered the writings of Henri Nouwen. Nouwen was a Catholic Priest, although perhaps not fitting the classic mould. He had many friends in protestant circles and strong connections with a diverse range of people from academics, the very poor and very wealthy as well as the mentally and physically disabled. Parts of what I want to share with you today are taken from one of his books that I read some months back and am re-reading right now. I am a firm believer in using the wisdom of others, so I am drawing on quite a few of his ideas which have of course come from people who had inspired him or books he had read.

In the opening of Nouwen’s book “Discernment” he says the following:

*“Discernment is a spiritual understanding and an experiential knowledge of how God is active in daily life that is acquired through disciplined spiritual practice.*

*Discernment is faithful living and listening to God’s love and direction so that we can fulfil our individual calling and shared mission.”*

I realise that's a bit heavy and I suspect some of you are looking at that quote and thinking "whoa – what's Paul on about today?" That's not me. Well, its not really me either so you probably don't need to rush out the door. I would hardly claim personally to have a rigorous "disciplined spiritual practice". But I could probably get better at it.

Put simply, discernment is about hearing what God is saying to us and what it means to us.

Nouwen suggests that God speaks to us in a number of ways:

- in solitude and stillness;
- through nature;
- through people;
- through events;
- in the Word;
- in Community.

I see all of these as inter-connected and inter-twined in many ways and we will have a look at aspects of these this morning. We are all different so some of these will be more significant to you than others.

The Bible has many passages which have accounts of God speaking to someone: God walking in the garden of Eden looking for Adam and Eve; the call of Abraham, Moses at the burning bush. There are some quite contrasting ways God speaks.

In the beginning of the book of Revelation John writes **"On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet."**

Quite a contrast to the picture in the two Old Testament readings I chose for today. I'm guessing most of us here have never had God speak to us in a voice like a trumpet.

I know someone who kind of did. (tell story of Ashley Fawcett.)

In the reading from Kings the story of Elijah tells of a great wind tearing rocks apart, then an earthquake, then a raging fire.

***"And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave."***

Different translations put this in different ways. I like the King James version: "a still small voice." Elijah only came out of the cave after he heard the gentle whisper - and then in the stillness God spoke to him.

The notion that God speaks to us in quietness and stillness is scattered through the scriptures. There is the very well-known verse in Psalm 46.

***"Be still and know that I am God"***.

We know from the gospels That Jesus valued times of quietness and solitude.

**Luke 5: “But Jesus would slip away into the wilderness to pray.”**

And he encouraged others to do the same. **In Matthew, Jesus suggests “But when you pray, go into your inner room and close the door.”**

Nouwen’s writings are also centred around the idea of hearing the voice of God with a very quiet contemplative approach. I see contemplation, stillness, solitude, and quietness in a kind of meditative prayerful state as all as being part and parcel of the same thing. Contemplation in stillness and solitude is firmly embedded in the history of Christianity, particularly in the lives of some of the famous saints of old and newer ones: St Francis of Assisi, St Benedict, St Ignatius of Loyola, St Augustine, Mother Theresa, Thomas Merton. When I get time I love to reading about the lives and teachings of some of these.

Perhaps I’m just getting old but the appeal of sitting quietly in a corner of the garden in quiet meditation and contemplation is growing. I will come back to the theme of stillness and contemplation a bit later.

**We can read the book of nature:** For many of us the natural world is also where we are touched by God speaking to us or feel his presence. Nouwen puts it this way: **“While it is true that God is a hidden presence, we have only to let nature speak to us about God who is everywhere.”**

**Psalm 19: The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.**

**Romans 1: For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen.**

I am sure that all of you have experienced the power of nature to restore us. I suspect this is both a natural process but also a spiritual one.

**Pay attention to people in your path:** God also speaks to us through people who cross our path. In 1 Samuel we hear a story of God speaking. God calls Samuel three times. Each time Samuel runs to Eli and says “you called me, and here I am”. On the third time Eli realises what is going on so gives Samuel instructions. Samuel needs the wisdom of Eli to help him tune in. When God speaks the fourth time, Samuel responds with humility “Speak, your servant is listening.” Samuel needed Eli to help him hear the voice of God.

In a similar way people can speak directly to us to give us encouragement, support, guidance or even corrections. They can also indirectly speak to us e.g. seeing a person in need might trigger a response from us. And of course reading books, watching videos and listening to podcasts are ways people we will never meet speak to us.

**Events and Circumstances:** As well as people, things that happen in our lives or events in the world around us can also speak to us if our eyes and ears are open. I

don't remember who it was that suggested we should always pray with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other - which is kind of capturing the idea.

Nouwen puts it this way: *"God is actively present in the moments of our lives at all times and places."*

**The Word:** Everything I've been talking about so far is somewhat subjective. It leaves us open to putting our own spin or interpretation onto what we think we are hearing. We need a safety net or an anchor. The scriptures are that safety net and are the primary way in which we hear what God is saying to us and provide the light that illuminates everything. The scriptures obviously contain some very clear guidelines to how we should live, particularly in the teachings of Jesus.

Some very familiar verses:

***Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. Psalm 119:105***

***All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17***

It is interesting to note though, that when the New Testament talks about the scripture or the Word it is actually referring to the Old Testament as the New did not yet exist. The third of the readings for today shed some useful light where Jesus says: ***Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. Matthew 7: 24-27***

In this passage Jesus seems to be claiming that his words have a very high authority behind them which is supported by his life and the events described in the gospels. Over the years I've heard many ministers, and read many writers, who suggest that we are on the safest ground when we interpret the whole of the Bible through the life and words of Jesus.

**Community:** In his book Nouwen links solitude and community together – as kind of sides of the same coin. Being **"in community"** is an idea that is scattered through the history of Christianity. In the book of Acts there are elements of this idea of being in community. Many of the famous contemplative saints of old lived in some kind of community. Nouwen at times lived in various communities. Community provides mutual support, but also a form of accountability and as well as a way of fulfilling the promise "wherever two or three are gathered I am there among you".

We obviously don't live in a community but the church, this church, is our equivalent. The idea that we are accountable to each other is not a very modern Presbyterian idea. It may have been in the past. I have an idea that the elders of old had a quite controlling function and church members were required to run all sorts of things past them. There are still some conservative churches and certainly some sects where this is still a practice. In case you're worried I'm definitely not suggesting that we

should go back to that. I have a fairly strong dislike of being told what to do or especially how to think.

But the modern church, and certainly this one, has a strong community feel to it, we do gather together in worship, sometimes in prayer groups, in home groups and in decision making groups such as the Council and gatherings of elders. Things often become clearer when they are worked through with others – God’s Spirit at work. Being “in community”, when it is functioning properly also provides a safety net to stop us individually going off the “deep end.”

## **Conclusion**

In my work I often meet people who are very stressed, or anxious or who tend to get very wound up. Being still is a key strategy that helps restore our well-being. When we get really wound up and have a lot going on “up here” we kind of go into auto pilot and our thoughts and feelings end up running us. But when we pause and notice our thoughts we put ourselves back in charge. The part of us that does the noticing; the observer is the real us. Our thoughts are just thoughts and they are not always accurate. We, the observer, allows us to choose how we will act and moves us away from the auto pilot state. Being still helps give us the space to do this well.

But coming back to our main theme for today I have another rhetorical question:

I wonder what you will take away from today?

I see stillness, solitude, and contemplation as a place where we have an opportunity to process all that we experience in life. The things that happen to us, the events that are unfolding in our communities and in the world, the time we spend in nature, the people we meet, the books we read, the light that comes from the Word are all part of God breaking the silence; God speaking to us through his Spirit. When we are in a quiet state it gives time for us to process and hear what God might be saying. When we are still, we are more open to hearing God’s voice. He is not being drowned out by the cacophony of noise that, at times, can be going on inside us.

So to conclude, I encourage all of us to listen for the “still small voice” through which God’s presence and will are known. To understand that God speaks to us all the time and in many ways, to hear God’s voice, to see what God sees, and read the signs in daily life.