

Proverbs 8:1-4; 22-31
John 16:12-15

Who Is Speaking?
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We seldom saw her in worship or at any event. She waited every day for the “Spirit” to tell her what to do, what to wear, what to eat, where to go etc. Some days she never got out of bed, there was no word from the “Spirit”. Other days she did not eat. Even when she did get out of bed she may or may not dress and when she dressed shoes might be mismatched, etc. It was all dependent on what the “Spirit” told her. Most days she did not cook and when she did her menus were strange to say the least. When the “Spirit” did speak it seemed to speak irrationally – at least from the perspective of family and friends. She missed graduations, weddings, funerals, baptisms because the “Spirit” did not tell her to go. Life for her family was a challenge at best. She waited daily, hourly for the “Spirit’s” direction/call. (Used capital Spirit because she firmly believed it was the Holy Spirit that was guiding her daily.)

How do we know what the word of the Spirit is for us today? Did not Jesus say in John’s Gospel that the Holy Spirit *“will guide us into all truth”*? In the cacophony of all the noises around us, how do we hear the Spirit’s call?

There was no doubt at Pentecost. As Pentecost is celebrated and the Spirit came to those assembled there, there was no doubt in the direction the Spirit was leading. The imagery of Acts is vivid. First, there was the sound – like the sound of a mighty wind. Recent interviews with the survivors of tornados back East tell of the noise of the wind as the tornado advanced. It was so loud that it deafened all other noises around them. It is in this power that the Spirit came.

Then there are tongues of fire coming down and settling on those gathered in the upper room. The wind and flame move them from the upper room out into the city, out into the world to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel. Suddenly the young church is alive with power. Jesus’ direction and promise is fulfilled. They have waited and suddenly the power comes upon them. There was no question about God’s direction to those gathered there in the upper room. The Spirit has come in power – moving the church into the world.

Who is this Spirit? We may have found a clue in Proverbs. Although Proverbs uses the term “wisdom” the writer could be referring to the presence and power of the Spirit. Even before the first words of creation were spoken Wisdom was present. In Genesis 1:26 God says, *“Let us make man/woman in our image...”* To follow the voice of Wisdom is to follow the voice of God. Wisdom was present, at God’s side, when creation began, *“Then I was a craftsman (master worker) at his side” (Prov. 8:30 NIV)*. Wisdom was with God from the very foundation of the world along with Christ. It is Wisdom that Proverbs would have us follow.

How then do we discern the voice of the Spirit/Wisdom in our lives? Are there any guidelines or are we like the woman in the opening – left to our own devices/hearing? I believe there are some guidelines from Scripture. The first being that we need to know who God is and what the characteristics of God are. This is a priority if we are to sort out the voices around us. One can find justification for almost anything in Scripture if one is willing to take a verse or two out of the context and culture in which it was given. If we are to know God we

need to know the whole story – see the whole picture. The Old Testament is incomplete without the New Testament and the New Testament is incomplete without the Old Testament. Together they complete the story of God. They demonstrate the progression of our faith. They assist us in discovering and understanding God’s work in the world.

Scriptures show how creation/humanity has missed the mark. They show how we have failed to live up to the expectations of God. They vividly show the past mistakes – there is no cover-up here. We have sinned and come short of God’s expectations/glory. But, they also show God’s patience and how we can correct our past mistakes. Christ came to demonstrate to us the true image of a God of love, forgiveness, compassion and grace. Not always the earmarks of the Church over the centuries.

How do we discern the voice of God? Second guideline that mirrors from the first, for me, is that God will never ask us to do anything contrary to the will of God or contrary to the Word of God. If God is love then our goal is to love as God has loved. If God is compassion then we need to be as compassionate as God.

We have been called to be stewards of creation. Stewards are those who care for the property of another with the same tenderness and love the owner/creator has. Stewards do not act on their own but are responsible to another for their actions. As we grow in Christ we learn the basics of our stewardship responsibilities – to all of creation, including people. The Spirit only asks or calls us to do what it has heard from God. It is not an independent Spirit that does whatever it wants. It is interdependent with God and Christ. It works in harmony with, not against. And, it ALWAYS seeks to bring glory to God, *“He will bring glory to me by taking what is mine and making it known to you” (John 16:14 NIV).*

We need to ask, “Does this action bring glory to Christ?” “Will Christ be in agreement with my decision?”

Pentecost pushed the Church from behind the walls of fear and insecurity and moved it out into the marketplace of the world. It moved the church into the world and not out of it. It asks that we become God’s ambassadors to all we meet and that we follow the example of Jesus. This, of course, brings us back to our first principle – we must know God/Christ.

Thought of the old RR signs. Do you remember them? Stop/Look/Listen. Not a bad guiding principle for our understanding of the voice of the Spirit. First, we stop – God is not in as big a hurry as we are. There was a 40-day delay between Easter and Pentecost. A time for reflection, growth, waiting. Then, we need to look and see where God is working in the world. Why Pentecost? This was a festival of the Jews. The whole city would be filled with people from all over the world – this was the proper time, the appropriate place. Then we need to listen – a mighty wind or a still small voice – God speaks in both.

And we must remember that God is always pushing the church into the world, not away from it. Staying inside these walls is not an option. Our task is not to build walls but bridges.

Take time and read some of the history of American Baptists. We have gone into the world with the full message of Christ. A message that is concerned with both the body and the soul. We cannot divorce one from the other and be true to the image of Christ. Dick and Marlene Mann served for years (they still volunteer) in northern Thailand. Dick is an agricultural missionary. His vision was to find a sustainable, financially viable crop that the hill tribe people could grow to replace the opium poppies. After several attempts (not all were successful) they found coffee. Today many of the hill tribes are growing “Starbucks” quality, fair-trade coffee. But, there is also an addiction center to help them find release from opium addiction and to hear the Good News of the Living Christ. But you often can’t hear when you are hungry, sick or addicted.

And, I wonder if we really realize what we are doing here? “Wings to Reading” is a remarkable journey. We have no idea how we are impacting the world – just by making a commitment to help children learn how to read. By demonstrating adults who care for them and who are willing to invest in their lives – that they might be able to read. Seeing them become more and more confident in themselves and their abilities. (Included in this is our adopting Cedar Way Elementary and being involved with it.) Is God speaking? Asking us to make a firm commitment to this program (yes, we have) – but, and the Wings director does not know this is included in today’s message, do we simply need to acknowledge this is our ministry and the heats, lights, water, etc. is our commitment to the Spirit’s call on us to be “in the world?”

What does Jesus say? *“But when the Spirit comes, he will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13 NIV).*

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989