

# “Guided By God”

## Part 4 – The Life You’ve Always Wanted

Psalm 1; John 10:1-5,14-15; Romans 12:1-2



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**February 17, 2008**

In George Bernard Shaw’s play *St. Joan*, someone who is present at her trial responds to Joan of Arc’s claim that God constantly speaks to her. “Why do the voices not speak to me?” he asks. Here’s what she tells him: “They do come to you; but you do not hear them. You have not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the angelus rings you cross yourself and have done with it; but if you prayed from your heart, and listened to the thrilling of the bells in the air after they stop ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do.” What is she saying? God is speaking all the time, but we’re not listening so we’re not able to hear it.

Is that true for us as well? Last Sunday morning during our wonderful Valentine’s Bake Sale I went out into the narthex to check out all the delicious homemade goodies our high school students had made. At one point I walk up to a table where two young people were sitting. One of them had ear phones on and was listening (I assume) to music; the other was text messaging someone on her cell phone. I stood there salivating for a few minutes and finally they looked long enough so we could complete our sale.

You can be 15 or you can be 50 and not be paying attention. There are so many different voices competing for our ears - the voices of society telling us what we should value and how we should live - the voices of people in our past and the little tapes we carry in our heads of what they expect of us - the voices of those we love and people we want to please. Some voices are beautiful, some destructive, some are the voices of fear, some of hope, some that separate us, some that call us together.

And somewhere amidst all those voices is the voice of God, speaking truth and love and guidance to us. But as John Ortberg tells us in his book, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*: the voices that we listen to and the voices that we follow will be the voices that give shape to our lives. (Incidentally, some of you have asked if there is a more complete book to read than the participant’s guide. And the answer is YES. *The Life You’ve Always Wanted* can be checked out from our church library and Patty and I also have copies of the book).

But back to the question: How do we sort through the clamor of these many voices to hear and recognize God’s voice? How do we learn to listen to those voices that will shape our lives in good ways? In God ways? How do we learn to tune in to the divine channel of God’s voice and receive the guidance we all need in our lives?

Our gospel lesson contains one of the great “I AM” statements of Jesus. “I am the Good Shepherd.” It says, “The sheep follow the shepherd because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” (John 10:4-5) What is Jesus saying? A Good Shepherd can be trusted because he wants what is best for us; and therefore it makes sense that we would want to know and follow his voice. But the truth is that we can easily get distracted.

(1) One reason we don’t know and follow the voice of the Good Shepherd is rather obvious: we’re simply not listening. We’re tuning it out. Life seems to be going well for us on our own strength and we don’t feel the need to hear and be guided by God.

For some of us, the only time we want to hear from God is when we’re faced with a major decision or when we’re in serious trouble. Should I pursue this course of action or that; marry this person or not; take this job or that?

Often we think about God’s guidance only in the terms of helping make the big decisions in life. If the truth be told it’s not so much that we are seeking God at those times but that we’re hoping for some “Insider Information” to know which course of action will result in financial success or emotional well-being. We’re hoping for a clear course of action from God to find a way around the risk of stepping into the unknown. We’re hoping for a sign from God so we can be more passive in the decision instead of doing the important work of wrestling through the pros and cons and the implications of our choices.

One of the ways we can know whether we are seeking God’s guidance for these wrong reasons is to ask ourselves if the only time we ask for God’s help is when we’re facing some kind of a crises in our lives.

(2) Another reason for our distraction is that we’re torn between multiple voices. Sometimes our challenge isn’t about knowing what voice is from God. Sometimes the challenge lies in the ambivalence we feel between what we know God wants and what we want. In his book Ortberg cites a passage from James 4:8: “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” What does it mean to be double-mindedness? Ortberg seems it as something we all experience when we have competing voices in our head—a double-mindedness that shows up in multiplicity or duplicity. He writes, “Multiplicity is a life marked by ambivalence...”

When we live a life of multiplicity, we both desire intimacy with God and flee from it. We long to be generous, but we also hoard and covet. Sometimes attempt to be servants and at other times we’re driven by arrogance and self-serving.

This is a very human dilemma. The apostle Paul struggled with this too. In Romans he writes, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15) Duplicity is similar to multiplicity but adds an element of deceit or falseness. Ortberg describes it saying “In duplicity there is a discrepancy between the reasons we give for doing something and the real reason why we are doing it. We say something that sounds humble, but secretly know that we are trying to impress people with our apparent humility.” So what do we do about our double-mindedness? Ortberg says that throughout history, those who have insisted that they hear God’s voice tell us they have learned to program their minds so they are able to receive the divine channel. They lock into a certain frequency. How do we begin to do that? How can we “tune in” to hear God’s voice speaking in our lives?

(1) One of the first things we need to do is to recognize that God can and does speak to us. God speaks to us in many different ways. Although some people claim to have heard an audible voice from God, that is not God’s typical way of speaking. God speaks through Scripture. God speaks through other people. God even has the ability to speak directly to our minds, guiding our thoughts. God can use almost anything to speak to us.

(2) Second, we need to recognize God’s purpose in speaking to us and guiding us. God’s purpose in guiding us isn’t so much about what we do. God’s main concern is not our financial success or happiness, whether we choose job A or job B; whether we go to this school or that. God’s main purpose in guiding us is in shaping us to be the right kind of people. It’s to have us grow in trust, and love, and Christlikeness.

Ortberg talks about how he has always wished that God would send him postcards with directions when he was making important career decisions. Instead he says that he has never received clear guidance from God when it comes to life’s major crossroads. He writes, “This used to frustrate me, but I have come to suspect there is good reason for it. God knows me well enough to know that if I have to grapple with these decisions—to think and struggle and examine my motives and assess the future and have conversations with wise friends and take responsibility for choices—I will grow in ways that would never be possible if I simply received a postcard in the mail. And God’s primary concern for me is not my external situation—it’s the kind of person I’m becoming.”

Learning about God’s guidance for my life has taken me on a bit of a journey. There was a time when as a young adult I thought I should become a draftsman or an architect so I got an art degree. But then I decided to shift directions, go to graduate school, and study theology and psychology thinking perhaps I should become a counselor. On one level I was taking classes a few days a week, working as a chaplain’s assistant in a hospital another few days a week, and on weekends I was leading a church youth group, seemingly going in multiple directions at once. But on another level, a deeper level, behind the scenes, I realized that God was shaping my character, developing my gifts, and instilling certain values in me that would serve me for a lifetime.

I began to realize that God's guidance wasn't so much toward a particular job but toward a life long vocation – the notion that my life belongs to God and as long as I am seeking to live within God's broader will, I am pursuing the right path.

How do we know what the right path is for us? John Ortberg suggests, "If we have a significant decision to make tomorrow, we can stop and ask for wisdom. If we have some discretionary time unexpectedly open up, we can pause and ask God, 'Do you have anything for me to do?' Then we can 'listen' for a moment, and if no prompting comes, we simply do what seems wisest. Each time we greet someone tomorrow, we can inwardly ask the Spirit, 'How can I respond to this person? Do you want to speak or work through me?'"

One thing that is key is if we get a sense of God prompting us, we need to respond. If we're not sure it was God but it seems consistent with what God might prompt us to do, we need to follow through. Responding to God's prompts makes it more likely that we'll continue to hear those promptings.

One of the times when I have found it helpful to tune in to God's voice has been when I've gone fishing just by myself. I'm sitting in my boat or standing on a river bank and I sense God's presence in the natural beauty around me. Another time for me has been at night – especially when I can't sleep – and I say, "Hi God. I know you're there. You never slumber or sleep. Here's where I need your help. I've had the needs of certain people on my mind; I have a problem that needs your wisdom and guidance." I've sometimes wished that I would receive a response that was crystal clear, but sometimes I don't sense one.

That used to discourage me until I started recognizing that just taking the time to tune my ears to hear the divine channel was valuable in and of itself. It would help me to be much more aware of God's active presence in my life. Hearing God's voice is very connected with what we do with our minds.

In Paul's letter to the Romans he says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2) By renewing our minds we are transformed so that we can better discern what is God's will for us. When Paul speaks of renewing our minds, he isn't just talking about acquiring more information, filling our minds with Bible trivia. Our mind isn't just a repository for information. The idea of renewing our minds refers to a whole range of perceiving, understanding, valuing and feeling that in turn determines the way we live. . . This renewal only takes place when we arrange our lives around those practices, relationships and experiences through which God produces transformation.

One of the best ways to renew our minds is to immerse ourselves in Scripture, to saturate our minds in God's Word. And a good way to do that is by the spiritual discipline of Scripture meditation. Scripture meditation is not some complicated practice that can only be done by contemplatives and mystics. I like how Ortberg describes meditation saying that it is "simply the process by which the mind dwells with some intensity and duration over a thought or image." He says "If you know how to worry, you know how to meditate."

Just like worry is going over and over in your mind what bad might possibly happen and all the possible implications and ramifications, meditation is going over and over something good and truthful in our minds and dwelling on the possible implications and ramifications of that truth in our lives.

There are lots of ways to practice meditating on Scripture. But before I get to those let me express a cautionary note. This book that God has given to us is a big book. Sometimes people try to take short cuts. Instead of embarking on the discipline of regular study and meditation people erroneously think of the Bible as a collection of magical sayings through which God will guide us. They don't understand that ingesting the wisdom in this book is like ingesting a meal. As the old question asks, "How do you eat an elephant?" The answer is: "One bite at a time." But we're impatient and so instead of engaging in the hard work of meditating on the Word and trusting that we will be guided and shaped by it over time, some people do what I call the "flip and dip" method of seeking guidance.

There was one woman who tried the "flip and dip method" of seeking guidance in the Bible by closing the book, opening the book, pointing her finger at particular passages of scripture, hoping and praying that God would speak to her through that particular passage. Well, she actually missed all the major parts of the text and landed in one of the spaces between the paragraphs. She was struggling financially at the time, and she looked down at the paragraph heading and it said "Chapter 11" at which point she immediately declared bankruptcy — and said: "God has surely guided me in this."

Someone else sought guidance from God by randomly opening the Bible and put his finger in at a particular point. He came to the story of Judas and read: "Judas went and hanged himself." He thought to himself, "That doesn't quite do it for me. I need another scripture, maybe God will speak through another passage." So, he flipped over, to find out if God really wanted him to hang himself, and he unfortunately put his finger on the place where it said: "Go though and do likewise!"

What are some better ways for us to get the most out of this book and extract from it the guidance and wisdom we all need? Ortberg makes four simple suggestions:

1. Ask God to Meet You in the Scriptures.

It is uniquely in the Bible that we encounter Jesus. Select your passage. Then before you begin to read, acknowledge that God is present with you. Our Brief Statement of Faith reminds us that "The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture and engages us in the Word proclaimed." We read the Bible with the hope of not of simply being *informed* but of being *transformed*.

2. Meditate on a Brief Passage

Sometimes when you study the Bible you need to read broadly, but when you read for transformation you need to go slowly. You can't meditate quickly. Chewing in the Word is not a fast food experience. There is no Evelyn Woods course in speed-meditation. Take your time. Your job is to stick with it as long as it takes until you've learned what you need to learn. It's helpful to reflect on how the various aspects of the passage relate to your life and ask yourselves questions related to the text.

If you're meditating on the first few verses of Psalm One, our Old Testament reading this morning, you might want to use a modern paraphrase like this one from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*:

How well God must like you –  
You don't hang out at Sin Saloon,  
You don't slink along Dead-End Road,  
You don't go to Smart-Mouth College.  
Instead you thrill to God's Word,  
You chew on Scripture day and night.  
You're a tree replanted in Eden,  
Bearing fresh fruit every month,  
Never dropping a leaf,  
Always in blossom.  
God charts the road you take.  
You're not like the wicked.  
The road they take is Skid Row.

Chew on those nuggets. Let your life and the scripture passage intersect in your mind.

3. Read with a Readiness to 'Let Go and Let God'  
Remember, you're not reading this passage to get information or increase your knowledge; you're simply opening your spirit to allow God's cleansing work to happen. Remember the analogy of the wash machine.

4. Take One Thought or Verse with You throughout the Day  
The writer of Psalm 1, in the NRSV says, "I meditate on your law day and night." Meditation is not meant to be spooky; it simply involves *sustained attention*. It builds on the principle that what the mind repeats, it retains. That's one reason why images are also used in meditation.

These simple steps are examples of what meditating on Scripture can look like. Just like all of the disciplines, it is a learned behavior and at first we may not be very good at it. We find that sometimes what we read becomes particularly meaningful and other times it's forgotten or just doesn't resonate with us through the day. But learning and practicing the discipline will result in better being able to discern God's voice of love, truth, encouragement and guidance.

As we continue with our series on *Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People, The Life You've Always Wanted*, I encourage you to try out this spiritual practice beginning this week and continuing through the weeks leading up to Easter; see how God begins to transform your mind, how God might speak to you and guide you, and how it helps you to start to tune in to that divine channel of God's voice.

Remember that quote we heard from St. Joan ("I hear God speaking to me.") Joan of Arc doesn't tell her questioner he's just no good at hearing from God. Instead she explains some of the practices or spiritual disciplines by which she was able to hear God's voice more clearly. We often think of spiritual disciplines as a burden, something we should be doing or that we feel guilty about if we're not doing. But these steps can lead us on a wonderful adventure of self-discovery. These holy habits are a key to transforming our minds so that we may recognize the guiding voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd, who was willing to lay down his life for us, who wants only what is best for us, and who helps us to find the right path. May we learn to know and follow his voice. In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.