

1

I know it may be hard to imagine ice fishing at this time of year, but I recently read about two guys who were visiting in Washington State one winter and had heard that ice fishing was a big sport in that area, so they decided to try it. They went to the sporting goods store and bought all the items they would need—lines, poles, bait, a small power saw—and then they found some ice and began to cut a hole in the ice. Soon they heard a loud, awesome voice from above proclaiming, “There’s no fish under the ice.”

They stopped for a moment, looked at each other with puzzled expressions, but since they were both embarrassed to admit they were hearing voices, they got back to sawing through the ice when once again the booming voice said, “There’s no fish under the ice.”

They nervously looked at each other again, but they kept on sawing through the ice. But then for the third time the voice proclaimed, “There’s no fish under the ice.”

Finally, one of them could no longer stand it, so he stood up and cried out, “Is that you, Lord.”

And the voice replied, “No, this is the manager of the ice skating rink.”<sup>1</sup>

Just how do we know when we’re hearing the voice of the Lord? What does God sound like? The Bible is filled with imagery of God’s voice.

- Genesis (3:8) says God sounds like the afternoon breeze or a smoking pot (15:17).
- Exodus envisions God’s call as a burning bush (3:2) or lightning-filled storm (13:21).

God’s presence in the Bible is often linked with storms, so when the writer of Psalm 29 tried to describe God, he used the common imagery of thunder and lightning for the special effects in his description of God:

“The voice of God is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters. The voice of God is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.”

2

The word translated as “majesty” comes from the Hebrew word *hadar*, which can mean “splendor” or “honor.” In the expressions of my younger years I might have said, “It was really cool,” though today youth might say, “It was awesome.” The psalmist was trying to describe something so amazing, so powerful, so overwhelming, that he used the imagery of thunder.

Sitting outside when a thunder storm rolls across a lake is an amazing experience—watching the lightning dance from sky to ground, hearing the thunder rumble over the water. It’s no wonder that the psalm writer envisioned this awesome experience as somehow related to God’s presence.

But I get a bit concerned as the writer continues the imagery: God’s voice breaking cedar trees, shaking the wilderness, stripping the forest bare with oak trees whirling all around. This just doesn’t match up with my imagery of God. I envision God as creative and gentle, not destructive and chaotic.

Earlier in the Bible in the first book of Kings, the prophet Elijah had an encounter with God on Mount Horeb. You may remember the story: While standing on the mountain, Elijah experienced a strong wind breaking rocks, an earthquake, and a raging fire. Elijah thought these were signs of God’s presence, but the narrator tells us that God was not in the wind, earthquake, or fire. And then in the silence, a small still voice reassured Elijah that God was with him.

When comparing these images from 1 Kings and Psalm 29, it’s as though the biblical writers are arguing amongst themselves, wondering, *Just how do we sense God’s voice? Is it in silence? Is it in the thunder? How do we know when God is trying to get our attention?*

John Wesley, the earlier leader in what became known as the Methodist Church, noted four tools in trying to discern God’s voice. The first is one that we use each week in worship: scripture. The Bible contains many writers who have expressed their

3

understanding of God, and their experiences and reflection about life can help us discern what God might be trying to tell us today.

But as we have seen, sometimes the biblical writers did not always agree, which means we need something else to assist us, and that leads to the second tool: tradition. In looking at what the church has said through the generations, we hear another set of voices that interpreted the scriptures and help give us insight into what God might be saying. But as we are aware, the church has not always been clear on issues. For example, in the past some portions of the church interpreted the Bible as approving slavery, though today we recognize that their understanding was incorrect.

That leads to the third tool: reason. We can use our minds to think about what makes sense. For example, does it make sense that God would destroy things as a way to get our attention? Humans may have temper tantrums and throw things, but does it seem reasonable that the Creator

of the universe would do such a thing? Probably not.

And finally, the fourth tool that we have is our experience. Each of us has our own experience with life, and you may have felt God's Spirit moving in your life in ways that differ from what someone else has experienced. Your own personal experience can help you sense God's voice.

Taking all four of these tools together—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—serves as a check and balance, helping us to clarify God's voice, discerning what God might be nudging us to do.

Writer Leonard Sweet says in his book titled *Nudge* that God nudges us pay attention and to nudge one another into an awareness of God's presence. In his chapter on using our ears, he encourages us to "hear the voice of Jesus in others and to use our ears to nudge others with the voice of Christ. He explains that "the living voice of Christ, spoken through another human being,

④

through the voice of tradition, through the voices of culture and nature, reason and experience, shouted out through the Scriptures” often comes in the “form of an interruption, often a difficult time.” It’s sometimes in those most difficult times of life that we draw closer to God, for our hearts are more open to listening.

Sweet asks, “Do you hear something different from what the world hears? Followers of Jesus hear something different.”<sup>2</sup> You see, somehow in the difficult times of life, as Christians we hear words of hope.

God invites us to take time to listen, for you never know what you might hear in the midst of your ordinary day. (Video: “stethoscope”)

God nudges us to help others hear the good news that they are loved, that God enfolds us in loving arms, healing us in the midst of our fragmented lives. Listen...you just might hear God’s words of hope speaking to you.

---

<sup>1</sup> Story adapted from *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking* by Michael E. Hodgin.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who’s Already There*, 2010, 144-45.