

Tuning In To God: My Sheep Hear My Voice - 3rd September 2023

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everybody. It's September. It's a new day. It's a new term. It's a new beginning. And we've got this sermon series, which I actually got the title of wrong. So this start might be a bit different. I thought it was hearing from God, but it seems to be tuning in from God.

So there may be a subtle difference. Now, tuning into God, hearing from God, this might be a topic that you find exciting, or you might find it a bit intimidating. You might be sitting here listening to me thinking, I don't know if I've ever heard from God. And I do actually talk to quite a lot of people who do say that to me. So don't feel alone if that's where you're coming into this from.

But today, if I have one aim and one aim only, I'm going to try and convince you that God is always communicating, not always in the most obvious way. And God is always talking to everyone, not just special people. So not the people at the front, not the people who call themselves prophets.

God is always talking to everyone. So before we get into the ins and outs of how you might hear from God and how God speaks, let's see what Jesus has to say on the matter.

Very truly, I tell you, Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice.

[1 : 37] He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger. In fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.

Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore, Jesus said again, Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved.

They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Just as the father knows me and I know the father and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold.

I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my father loves me is that I lay down my life only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my father. So this passage that we're looking at today comes from John's gospel and it's in chapter 10. So it's like in the middle of the gospel and it might not be where you start of thinking, where do I hear from God? But I think this is a really useful and helpful place to start because it's one of John's famous I am sayings, which tell us a bit about who God is. And I don't know, you may have remembered me saying this before, you may not, because you've come to the church since then. But John's gospel, like most of the New Testament gospels, is not structured like modern books. So in modern books we kind of build up to the important bit at the end. Whereas with ancient literature, the important bit happens in the middle. So the bit that happens bang in the middle is the most important one. So there are seven I am sayings in

[4 : 31] John's gospel and this one is the one at the very middle, I am the good shepherd. So that's the most important one. And all of the others kind of try and bring out something that's true about that one.

So this is John's most important, most central statement about who God is. And what does it tell us? We have this picture of a shepherd and the sheep know his voice. Well, a shepherd is a really common leadership metaphor throughout the whole ancient world, not just the Bible. But Jesus isn't talking about ordinary shepherding here. Jesus is talking about one picture of what it means to be a particularly good shepherd. One so dedicated to his sheep that he knows their names, they recognise his voice, so he can call them one by one through the gate. This is a shepherd that puts the time in.

We hear that they're not like the hired hand. They stay there if the wolf comes and they will defend them even with their life. This is a shepherd that recognises each sheep and is ultimately very gentle with the sheep. Now this reminds me quite a lot of a farmer who used to live near my parents, a man called Farmer Charles. Farmer Charles was a very interesting man. He started learning maths on his tractor so that he'd have something to think about. But he was also a very wise man and he'd been in farming for a very long time, mostly in sheep. And he started, like a lot of farmers do, by using dogs to move his sheep around. But over time, he looked at the interaction between the sheep and the dogs and he realised that when they were being chased by the dogs, the sheep were just perpetually terrified. And he thought, I'm bringing these animals up. They don't live that long and I want their life to be good. So I don't want them to be perpetually scared. So over time, he moved to leading the sheep from one field to another with his tractor rather than chasing them so that they wouldn't be afraid. It took a lot longer. The sheep were very slow. They'd see the tractor, they'd kind of amble towards the tractor, then they'd amble into the next field. And, you know, they would all come, but they'd form this very long queue. It took longer, but they got used to it. And it got to the stage where his tractor would come over the hill and they'd all sort of slowly walk towards the tractor because they knew it. He didn't offer them any food to make them come. He didn't offer them anything. They just knew him and trusted that he would lead them somewhere good. And so they follow him. And if you think about the way that Jesus is describing the good shepherd leaving the sheep, it's actually even more time consuming than what farmer Charles was doing because he's calling each and every single sheep one by one through the gate. So what can we see about the way that Jesus is talking about being the good shepherd? Well, firstly, we can see that Jesus isn't talking about a carrot or a stick approach. He's not talking about leading people by making them scared. God doesn't speak to us or lead us into positions that scare us unnecessarily. And God doesn't seek to rule us with fear.

But God isn't offering us a carrot either. They're not offering us something particular for doing as we're told. Ultimately, we see this picture of the relationship that God wants to have with us, which is where the sheep follow because they know the shepherd, because they trust the shepherd, not because the shepherd's offering them food. So I think God talking, communicating is about the relationship, not just setting tasks and rewards. The other thing to notice is that the image we're given of ourselves is of sheep. And sheep definitely aren't the sharpest of creatures.

In fact, this one looks particularly gormless. In fact, if you look at a daily life of sheep, they spend eight hours eating and then eight hours chewing their regurgitated food so that they can digest it properly and eight hours sleeping. So they haven't really got any time to do anything else. The fact that we're told the sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd and they don't follow other voices is ultimately hopeful. It means that we, who are a bit more than sheep, will ultimately recognize the shepherd's voice. We're all here from God because we're told that God puts the time in and the sheep hear the shepherd, not just the prophets. It's not just the prophets that hear the shepherd, it's all of the sheep. So hearing from God is not something that happens to some people and not others. God is always speaking to all of us. God will ultimately call us all from one gate to the next. God doesn't speak most to the more holy, to prophets or those who are really clever or always have their nose in the Bible or have spent time studying theology. God speaks equally to all of us. God stands by the gate calling all of us forward by name. Now, I don't know, you may or may not have had an experience in life where you feel like you've heard God's voice very clearly. Sometimes it feels clear and sometimes it feels blurry.

[9 : 41] There are times when God is very specific. There are people who get explicit words, images, pictures, dreams. I'm sure quite a lot of people in this room may have felt like that at times.

Though I guess what I'd say with the very explicit images and messages, you do need to be a little bit careful and discerning. For example, and this is the example everyone uses, but my sister went up to university and she went to a Christian thing and immediately this horrifying boy comes up to her and says, God has told me that you have to marry me. That's the classic example. They are not married.

She married someone else and she's very happy. Thank you very much. But that's the classic one which you have to be a bit careful with. If God is telling you that you're going to marry someone, that you've got to make sure that the other person is getting the same message, right? Otherwise, it's not going to happen. And actually, I heard of one example where there was one music pastor who received four proposals after the thing. Each of the women came up to him and said, God has told me that you're going to marry me. And he didn't marry any of them. So there are problems with the specific images. They do take discernment. You have to kind of hold them gently. And then there are other times when you think, God, you could be a lot more clear. It can feel like you're looking at a grainy picture, like you can't quite see exactly what's there. Or sometimes you just want it to be really, really clear before you do something risky. So I remember when I was exploring my call to the priesthood, I used to beg God to make it clear by writing it in the skies with fire. Never happened.

Instead, God nudged me and niggled me a thousand tiny ways, gradually changing my heart and leading me one step at a time, sometimes in ways that I can only see as I look back. So I want to say, feeling like you haven't heard from God doesn't mean you aren't hearing from God. It's like looking at the skies. Sometimes God is always talking, but sometimes you can't recognize it. So God speaks to all of us in a number of ways. And they're all ways that we can depend on. Firstly, and most obviously, God speaks to us through the scriptures. There's a lot written in there. And some of it's very clear, even when you take context into consideration, even when you think really hard about how the story is told and all of the narrative devices and how it relates to other stories.

Sometimes the message is just clear. So for example, I think throughout the Bible, God reminds us that we should care about people who are poorer than ourselves, that we should welcome immigrants, that we should try and be generous with our money, and that we should definitely pray and make time for God. Those are things that are in the scriptures. They are there speaking to us into our language all the time. And I think that God also speaks through the scriptures in more subtle ways.

[12 : 28] So when you take time to read the scriptures regularly, you start to draw parallels between the stories in the Bible and the stories in your life. And these stories will kind of sit together and journey together, a bit like this picture, really, and help you see things differently. I think you can often see this in modern Christian art, for example. So I think there are sometimes like, I couldn't find the exact picture. But there was a really beautiful rendition of the Mary and Joseph story at the time when Donald Trump was putting people into cages, migrants into cages and separating children from parents.

And someone created an artistic rendition of this where they had the manger in a cage on its own, and Mary and Joseph in separate cages. And that's someone who sat with the biblical story very deeply.

And it's affected the way they see refugees, because they remember that Jesus was a refugee. So when they looked at refugees in the United States, and there was a policy to separate children from parents and put them in cages, this is what the scriptures said to them. It spoke very directly into this modern day. The scripture said today, if Jesus came and fled in this modern day, Jesus might be found in one of these cages, alone, separated from his parents, or more recently, perhaps in one of those dangerous barges. God also speaks through other people, especially, I think, the people we worship with, so the people around us today.

So, for example, when we go around the day-to-day business of telling each other, you're loved, you're worthy of time and respect, or even reminding people that God loves them, because they don't always remember, then those words are God's words. They're words that we are holding together as a community when we do the work of loving each other, because they echo God's messages in the scriptures, in the whole of creation.

God also speaks through other people in other ways, and they can be more direct. I hear that there have been some people coming here with messages that have been quite exciting, and certainly I remember one evening when I was serving in one of the soup kitchens in Bristol, and I got chatting to a chap, and we started talking for about 20 minutes about nothing in particular, in a kind of warm way. And after about 20 minutes of small talk, the man just turned to go.

[14 : 56] And just before he went, he told me, I was loved and worthy of respect, and that God loved me, and that it was okay for me to quit my job that was hurting me at the time. I hadn't mentioned my job to him. We'd been making small talk for 20 minutes.

It was one job which had left me feeling unworthy and anxious, and I was balancing it with a lot of other jobs. And whether out of loyalty or fear of letting go, I don't think I would have let go of that job without being told quite explicitly, because I'm very stubborn, and I don't like to quit.

And I still believe perhaps I met an angel that day, and he looked a little bit like this. And then I guess we have hunches, images, nudges that you get from God.

Things that say, explore this, or think about that, or say something about that. These mostly come from when we let our imagination go in prayer, and allow God to guide us and show us things.

So things like worship help, or silence, or communion. They help because they let God come in, and we kind of let go of control for long enough to let God speak.

[16 : 02] And you get a sense of something that seems important, or you imagine an image, or a scene, or a word. And for me, it's mostly communion and walking around praying that work for me.

Sometimes being in deep conversation with someone else. Hunches, images, nudges, they are amazing, but they do always take discernment, because sometimes in prayer there's something you desperately want to see.

And sometimes you do end up seeing what you desperately want to see, and then you have to step back and think, which bit of this comes from God? I think if you take one of these hunches in your own life, and you kind of follow it through, and it feels like it's from God, you can normally tell it by its fruit.

By which I mean, generally, you tend to feel more at peace and happy, making decisions that God nudges you towards, even if they leave you poorer, or less well, or in a more complicated position.

There's a kind of, okay, I can put that to bed now. If you have a nudge for someone else, well, that's difficult, isn't it? Because you don't get to see the fruit, you don't feel the peace.

[17 : 06] I think when we're offering nudges to someone else, it's polite to offer them very privately, so that they can work out what to do with it, and if it means anything in their life at all. And if you have a nudge in your own life that's going to make you do something really radical, you know, talk to people in your worshipping community first.

That's what I would say, because we're all Christians, we're all praying together, we can all help each other discern things in a sensible way. Then sometimes you'll have a feeling from God which is a bit heavier.

This can feel like sometimes you're carrying something for someone, that you need to pray for someone quite suddenly. This can be very heavy and emotional. I remember when I was training at theological college, there was one lady who had the gift of tears, where she would basically cry for other people who she didn't know that well, and then feel like it was done.

This is a very heavy gift, is one I'm very pleased that I don't have. But if you do, I think it is also a precious thing. It can be a divine reminder that we're all connected, that sometimes people need to be there for someone else.

And I think generally, as a rule, what we do in prayer, the way we hear from God in prayer, should also reflect what we do in everyday life. So if I have an urge to pray for someone, I do try and tell them about it, though I am, of course, praying for everyone when I talk to them as well.

[18 : 36] They will, most of the time, at least 95% of the time, be pleased to know you're praying for them, even if they don't believe in God. And they won't worry about it very much if they don't. That's my rule, anyway, because they just think, oh, this is an odd thing that you do in your time.

Well, that's fine. You do you. I'll do me. Well, certainly that's the case of my atheist friends. But finally, if we learn anything from the Bible, it's that God doesn't ever give up or go silent on you, ever.

I find that when God is frustrated with you or wants you to change direction, God normally becomes more loud and persistent. I mean, biblically, if we think about the parable of Jonah trying to do his own thing and ending up in the body of a whale, at least in my experience, God reaches out further, harder, every time you think you might be going wrong and you're praying about it.

So as we embark on this new sermon series on hearing from God, on tuning into God, I think we can take heart from the message in John's Gospel about Jesus as a good shepherd because as he's a loving shepherd who cares for and knows each of his sheep, we're also told that God loves for and does reach out to all of us.

It is natural to wonder sometimes if we've ever truly heard from God. But today, I just want to remind you that God's communication is not reserved for the select few. God doesn't seek to instill fear or offer rewards for obedience.

[20 : 07] Instead, what God longs for is what we see in the relationship between Jesus and Mary, a deep relationship. The fact that sheep, not even known for their intelligence, can recognise the voice of the shepherd tells us that we can all hear and know and understand God's voice too.

So when you're praying, remember above all, God is speaking. God doesn't give up on us and God will be persistent in guiding us.

So I hope that the rest of this sermon series will be really useful. It looks like it's going to be really great when you look at the list of speakers and what they're going to say. But I think this is a really good series to open our minds and hearts to the possibility of hearing from God in new and unexpected ways.

So loving God, let's pray. Loving God, help us to trust the good shepherd, who you are. Help us to trust that you will call us all by name and lead us each with love.

Help us to trust that you are speaking to us, even though it looks like sometimes we're looking out into the sky and all we can see is stars and we can't make sense of them. Help us to trust that you will never lead us with fear, but you long for a genuine relationship with us, eager to walk with us and guide with us, guide us on our own spiritual journey.

[21 : 30] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.