

Tuning In To God: Taking Off The Earmuffs - 1st October 2023

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Preacher: Kim Thomas

[0 : 00] Thank you, Ruth. Thank you, everybody. Hello, good morning. It's lovely to have this opportunity. It's really a privilege to stand up here and preach. Preaching, I think, is God's gift. And it's a wonderful opportunity to stand up and say what I think God was speaking to me about as I prepared, as Ruth had said.

And, well, somebody said to me, well, you like preaching because you like the sound of your own voice. But I hope that this will be the sound of God's voice as well. I do hope that you sit on the edge of your seats in eager anticipation, waiting to hear what God is going to say to us.

I have to start by saying a very big thank you to Dave because we swapped places in a preaching rota because I got invited last minute on a cruise.

Ooh, get me. So I went on this cruise and Dave swapped the preaching rota and I was going to talk about something very different. But in honesty, I wanted to talk about this. But Matt didn't give me this subject to talk about. Ha ha. See, it did. It worked out in the end.

So maybe God wants me to talk about this because it's about taking off the earmuffs. We've had some absolutely fantastic preaches about how we listen to God and do we listen to God and what does God say to us and how can we tune in, like the radio, how can we tune in to God?

[1 : 25] And I thought, well, sometimes we don't want to listen to God. Really? We don't want to listen to God. We don't want to listen to what he says for lots and lots of reasons.

So this week it's called taking off the earmuffs. So I want you to think at the end of this, is God trying to tell me something and I just don't want to listen? Because that's my experience a lot. Is God trying to tell me something but I don't want to listen?

So Jesus calls his disciples. He stands before his disciples and he calls them to come and follow him.

And this is the scripture from Matthew. It says, As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake for they were fishermen.

Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will send you out to fish for people. At once they left their nets to follow him. Now, if Jesus appeared in front of you and said, Stop what you're doing. Come and follow me.

[2 : 43] Do you think you'd do it? I think it was probably a lot easier in those days because Jesus was there in physical form, wasn't he? He was there and he was saying, This is what I want you to do.

And he must have had something about him because they stopped what they were doing, which was their livelihood, and they followed Jesus. So I think he must have had something very enticing for them.

He must have had that charisma, mustn't he, to talk to them and they actually do it. So going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John.

They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Well, that takes some dedication, that does, doesn't it, to leave your dad and everybody else and go and follow this itinerant preacher. But this is more like me.

[3 : 46] You might be there, Lord. You might be standing there telling me to do something. You might be there asking me to do something or other. But la, la, la, la, la, I like it better when I can't hear.

I like it like this. Why on earth wouldn't you want to hear God talking to you? Well, sometimes we don't, do we? Sometimes we don't.

Because when God calls people, sometimes it's inconvenient. And it could be painful. And it could be not what we had planned at all.

And that happened to me. Many years ago now, 25 years, 30 years nearly, years ago, I was praying and God speaks to me often in pictures.

Visual person and I get pictures. And I was praying and I got this picture. And I was sitting in church. And I saw a female priest in all, you know, the black stuff that we wear sometimes, walking up the middle of the aisle towards the door and out into the community.

[5 : 01] And I thought, oh, I wonder who that is. And when I turned around, it was me. Dog collar, everything, you know. And I went, no, no, no, no, no, no. I'll do anything, God, but I won't do that, you know.

And I really felt that this was what God wanted me to be. Let me just go on and just see. Ah, yes, he was calling me. He was calling me to do something that I didn't want to do.

So the earmuffs went back on, you know. And I was saying, no, no, no, no, no, you know. You can't call me to do this. I can't do it. And I won't do it. I just won't do it.

I'm not good enough. I can't do this. You've made a mistake. Go and call somebody else. So I decided that it was all in my mind and I'd made it up. And over the next six years, that feeling just wouldn't go away.

It just wouldn't go away. I explored ordination. Our diocese, Litchfield Diocese, has the director of ordinands. So if you feel called to ordination, you go and see the director.

[6 : 06] Or you did in those days, go and see the director of ordinands. And they'd talk things through with you. And I kept saying, no, this isn't for me. This isn't for me. This isn't for me. I spoke to my vicar who said, oh, thank goodness.

At long last, you're listening to what God's telling you to do. And I was going, no, no, no. I don't want to do it. And he's saying, but God's calling you to do this. I've known this for ages. And I said, no, no, no.

And I really felt that God had made a mistake with me. And he'd made this big mistake. And every encouragement that I had, I rejected it. Because I thought it was a figment of my imagination.

Why I would think that, I don't know. Because it wasn't something I wanted to do. You know, sometimes you think, well, if God's asking me to do something I want to do, then maybe that's worth testing.

But if it's something you really don't want to do, maybe it is God speaking to you. So what did I do? I made myself busy. I ran the children's ministry in church, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

[7 : 05] I love kids, love children's ministry. I led a couple of house groups. And I was really, really busy. And really busy doing what I thought I should be doing. But that feeling about, I want you to be ordained, I want you to serve me in this way, would not go away.

So, eventually, I got fed up. And I laid a fleece before God.

I said to God, okay, if you really want me to be ordained, then you have to tell other people to tell me. And within a week, five people had told me that God wanted me to be ordained.

And they knew nothing of my journey or my struggle. They knew nothing of it. I kept it to myself.

And the one that really got to me was one day, I'm driving along the road at Overseal with my mum. And she turned to me and she said, of course, you know the Lord wants you to be a vicar, don't you? You know. And I went, no, how do you know that? She said, I've always known it. Well, why are you telling me now?

[8 : 10] And she said, well, I'm telling you now, because I think it's the right time to tell you. Well, you just can't beat those odds, can you? Yeah. So there you go. There's me. The big picture's me and my little mum.

She's no longer with us. And all the other things that I did as an ordained person. Most of those photos are taken in Australia, actually. But the one there is outside Litchfield Cathedral.

And eventually, 20 years ago, I finally got to be ordained. It wasn't easy. I had to give up what I was doing. I was working in a funeral home then. And I gave up my job.

And I went off to Durham, to university there, to theological college, or vicar factory as we used to call it. And then I had to move again to become a curate and move again and again and again and again, following God's calling.

Saying yes to God was really difficult. But I tell you what, since I said yes to him and actually thought, OK, I'll do this, since I took off the earmuffs, my life has changed amazingly.

[9 : 18] I have had such riches bestowed upon me. And it's just been an incredible, incredible life. As you can see, I mean, I was a vicar in, well, I was a curate, like Ruth, in Newcastle-under-Lyme, between there and Stoke.

And then I was a vicar for nine years in a church in Stretton, which is just outside Burton-on-Trent. And while I was there, I got invited by the Archbishop of Perth to go out to Australia and be a vicar there.

And there's my church at the top there, or our church at the top there, me sitting there with the dog. And that little church was one of the two churches I looked after. And then the other pictures are various times when I was in Australia.

But do you know what? It took a lot of, as you've heard, it took a lot of work to take off those earmuffs and actually trust God to what he was calling me to do and trust myself as well.

And sometimes, for really good reasons, we can build a brick wall up between us and God. And there are lots and lots of different reasons why we build this brick wall up.

[10 : 39] So I'm just going to touch on a few of them now, very quickly. The first one is rationalism. Rationalism. Do you know, we rationalise God.

We say, no, that couldn't possibly be God. God speaking to us. Or we think that we've got to suspend reality when God does speak to us. And sometimes our rationalism gets in the way. Maybe, are you an overthinker? Do you overthink things? I've got a friend who's a huge overthinker.

And it drives me mad when I say, shall we go to say and say, oh, well, what if that? And what if that? And what if that? And what if that? And I think, don't think about this too much. Don't think about this. And actually, people pick up on, if you think about things too much, there's nothing wrong with thinking about things.

We have to do that. But if you think about things too much, it can stop you actually doing what you're going to do. And I remember, because I'm a scuba diver, I remember going to Egypt with this lady.

[11 : 40] And we went to look around some shops in the little local area after we'd been diving. And this guy invited us into his handbag shop because he wanted us to buy his handbags. And we go, no, we're not going to buy handbags.

And he said, no, no, come and have a cup of tea with us. So we had some apple tea with him. And then after talking to him for a bit, he said to my friend, you think too much. And I kind of looked at him.

And then he looks at me and says, you, not at all. Thanks a lot, mate. Thanks a lot. But we can, we can over-rationalize things. You know, God might be speaking to me, but what if he's not? What if this is my voice I hear? Or maybe I'm just thinking this is what God is saying. Maybe, and oh gosh, I've been through all of that myself. And I'm sure you have some time.

And sometimes we can think our own wisdom will get us through. Now, there's absolutely nothing wrong with wisdom. You know, I'm a great, great fan of Solomon. He was a really wise guy.

[12 : 40] But there's nothing wrong with wisdom. But we have to remember that some of the words that Solomon said. He said, trust in the Lord and lean not on your own understanding.

Trust in the Lord and lean not on your own understanding. Acknowledge him in all your ways so you can follow his path. So Solomon, the wisest of men, was saying, you know, trust in God.

Put your trust in him because he won't let you down. And do you know what? I found that. I really did. Because I went into this ordination business thinking, oh, there's no way I could do this.

And you're right. There is no way I could do this. But God can do it through me. God can do some amazing things through you if you just let him do it. If you just trust him. Trust him enough to let him do it through you.

So I think for me, wisdom is one way. It's the ability to weigh God's word with his character. You know, we know God.

[13 : 41] We know he's a God of love. And it's that ability to weigh his word with his character and his promises. And to remember that with God, the best for us.

And he wants the very, very best for each and every one of us. So the next one is fear. Now, fear is the brick in the wall that stopped me saying yes to God.

That was what stopped me saying yes was fear. I was just so afraid. You know, what if I fail? What if I'm not good enough? What if? What if? What if? That all comes from fear.

There was so much fear that I would either make a fool of myself or that I would fail. I was building that wall up as quickly as I could.

Because I was just afraid. I was afraid that I couldn't do what God had asked me to do. And as I've said, of course I couldn't do what God had asked me to do. But he could do it through me.

[14:40] So I just wonder who's afraid of the unknown. Of God speaking to us. And maybe being afraid that it's going to be bad news. Well, I won't listen to God because if God speaks to me it might be bad news.

Or how about, well, I won't listen because I might be being deceived. Is this God or is it the devil trying to lead me astray? These are all based in fear, these things.

Maybe you're afraid that God is getting too close. And thinking if you let him get too close, then he won't like what he sees. I need to tell you, God knows every single piece of us.

He knows us better than we know ourselves. But it's a bit like, you know, that old Beatles song, Eleanor Rigby, that she picks up a face in the jar that she keeps by the door.

You know, have we got a mask that we wear in front of God? It's no good wearing a mask in front of God. He knows every bit of us. Maybe God will ask you to do something you just don't want to do.

[15:48] And I think that for me was the biggest obstacle. It was that fear that I'm going to be doing something, yes, to God and I'm going to be doing something I didn't want to do. But as I've said, it became one of the greatest blessings that I've ever had in my life.

Other than my son, of course, and my grandchildren. You see, because behind all these fears, there's a lie. There's always a lie behind these fears. And once we face up to the lies, it's a bit like in the book that we're reading.

It was a bit like he said, when I think, is this a lie? I take the bull by the horns and I look directly and say, where's Jesus in all of this? And it's standing up.

It's standing up to the lie and saying, God thinks I'm good enough. God loves me. God thinks I'm good enough. And if God thinks I'm good enough, that's good enough for me.

So whatever God asks of us, he doesn't expect us to do it alone. He promised he would never leave us or forsake us.

[16:54] And he asks us to trust him as well. Solomon again.

So trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. Try to put that fear aside. That fear, wherever it comes from, there's a lie behind it.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways, submit to him and he shall direct your path.

I can stand up here in front of you and say, God has never, ever, ever let me down. I might have not wanted to do some of the things he wants me to do, but he's never let me down.

Never. So what about the other brick, shame? Shame is about feeling unworthy. Do we feel unworthy?

[18:03] And again, it's based in a lie. We don't feel worthy. We don't feel good enough, adequate or beyond redemption. Perhaps we don't feel that we measure up.

God isn't asking us to be perfect. Just open, loving and obedient. And he'll never let us down. God knows what we're like and he asks us to do things anyway.

Stand up to the lie that you're not good enough. Because you are. Stand up to that lie. Take that bull by the horns and say, in the name of Jesus, I am good enough. I am good enough.

I am worthy. Put your shoulders back and look Jesus in the eye and say, if you're not ashamed of me, then I'm not ashamed of myself.

And Jesus is not ashamed of us. He loves us. He wants us to do the best. Now, looking at some of the others.

[19:06] I'm not going to keep going on all of these. But sin and pain. I'm not going in too deeply to these because somebody else is going to talk, unpack it in a few weeks time. But some of the bricks in the wall come from hurt, anger, grief, guilt and empathy.

And we can carry those burdens. We can carry those burdens like a weight. Sin can weigh us down.

And it's a hard burden to carry. And we don't have to carry it. That's the thing. We don't have to carry it. We just give it to God.

We just ask God to forgive us for our sins. It's easy. It really is as easy as that. We just ask God to forgive us for our sins.

And because of Jesus, he will. We say we're sorry. We hand it over to Jesus. And we don't have to carry that heavy weight anymore.

[20 : 06] So, carrying on about taking off the earmuffs and things that hold us back from listening to God. When you pray, is your mind a jumble?

It's funny because Matt was talking a while ago, wasn't he, about when he prays. He goes for a walk. He goes for a walk. And he said he asks God some questions. And I was sitting there thinking, what's he asking then?

How are you doing, God? Yeah, well, I know you're okay because you're God. I'd love to ask Matt what the questions are that he asks him. Maybe it's something about what can I do for you today. I think that would be a good question, wouldn't it?

But my mind is like madness inside. It's all jumbled up. It's like knitting wool. And I start to concentrate. And then I can't focus.

And I give up. And I asked God about this one day. And he said, be still and know that I am God. Now, you don't know me that well. But to be still, for me, is blinking hard.

[21 : 12] You know, I don't take being still too often, too well. Because things come and distract me. You know, I'll sit and I'll start praying. And I'll go, dear Lord, I love you so much.

And, you know, you're great. And you're wonderful. Ooh, what are we having for tea tonight? You know, yeah? I can see some nodding heads. So, yeah, ooh, hang on a minute. Did I get such and such out the freezer?

Ooh, ah, have I done this? Have I done that? And I think, ooh, like this. And that's what it's like inside my head sometimes. But God said to me, be still and know that I am God.

And I think, ooh, no. And I hear it over and over and over again. And do you know what? When I do sit down, when I do sit down and I am still, then I know that God is God.

Jesus is willing to unblock our ears. Jesus is willing to help us to be still. Jesus is willing.

[22 : 14] He wants us to walk with him and hear him and walk alongside him. And one of the things I thought about was this wonderful story about Jesus healing somebody.

Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk.

And they begged Jesus to place his hand on him. After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears.

Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, Emphata, which means be opened.

At this, the man's ears were opened. His tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. Be open.

[23 : 40] Jesus wanted that man to have clear hearing. He wanted him to have a whole life that included being able to hear.

Jesus healed that man because he knew what he wanted. Sometimes we block our own ears up. We put our fingers in our ears and go, la, la, la, la, la, la, la.

And Jesus goes, be open. Listen, listen. I want you to hear. And I want you to have the fullness of life. And there's a great power in listening.

There's a huge power of listening. Just to be still and know that God is God. And I'm going to finish with a story about how God will speak to us sometimes in a way that we don't know until we've got our eyes open and our ears open.

Because, as I was saying, I kept hearing God say to me, be still and know that I am God. Now, I sit down and I read the daily readings every day in my Bible.

[24 : 49] So, I sat down the other day and look where my bookmark is. And it's Psalm 46. And it says, Be still and know that I am God.

I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Now, if that's not a word from God, I don't know what is.

You know, if we have our eyes open and our ears open. I just opened the Bible to read the daily reading and that's where the bookmark was. And God had been saying to me, Be still and know that I am God.

And it's a real discipline for me, it is anyway, to be still. But if we're willing, if we're willing, God will speak to us.

If we're willing, if we can take off those earmuffs, if we can push down that brick wall, then God will speak to us.

[25 : 52] God will not only use us, but God will equip us to do the very best that we can with whoever we are and whatever we have to offer.

Now, when I was in Australia, as I say, I was first of all in a parish church, but then I went to a school and I was a school chaplain for a couple of years before I came back to England.

And I used to go with the kids to camp. We used to go away to camp. Well, that was interesting.

You know, 60 plus years old and I'm going off with all these kids to camp and they're going, Rev Kim, Rev Kim, you've got to do this, you've got to do that.

Oh, no, I don't. And I am absolutely petrified of heights. And one group of kids made me promise that next year when I went back to camp that I would do the zip wire.

So I did. When I went back to camp, I did the zip wire. Thank you. And I abseiled as well. By golly, did I need God then?

[27 : 01] Did I need God then? But the tagline of this camp was expand your paradigm. Broaden your horizons. Do something you haven't done before. You know, make, make, make, like take chances.

Expand your paradigm. And I keep saying to my grandchildren now, especially George, the older one, who's autistic. Expand your paradigm, George. Don't let fear hold you back. Don't let fear stop you doing what you can do.

And that's what God says to us. Please trust me. Don't let your fear or your feeling of inadequacy or whatever it is, any of those things that I've talked about, don't let any of those things hold you back.

Expand your paradigm. So expanding our paradigm is a brilliant thing. It isn't easy.

But with God's help, we can all do it. We can all do it. And you might be sitting there thinking, you don't know about me. You don't know about my life. You don't know what's happened. No, I probably don't. But God does.

[28 : 09] And he knows what you can do. He knows what you can do. And if it's just putting one foot in front of the other or just getting out of bed in the morning, God will help you do that.

You know? If it's making the best of whatever's happening in your life, God will help you do that. I just want to encourage you.

Don't be afraid to listen to God because I missed out on six really great years. If I'd have said yes to God straight away, I missed out on six really good years.

But never mind. He gave me another 20 years that were just great anyway. So, take off the earmuffs. Let's take off the earmuffs. Let's push down that brick wall because it doesn't belong in our lives because God is with us and walks with us always.

Amen. Amen. Right, let's, shall we have a little bit of, just a little bit of quiet for a couple of minutes and let's pray, shall we?

[29 : 15] Father God, loving, loving God, God of all creation who knows us and loves us, help us not to be afraid.

Help us to see ourselves as you see us with all the possibilities, with all the promises that you offer us.

and just as Jesus gave hearing to that man, give us hearing, Lord, that we may hear you but also say yes to you.

Amen.