

Tuning In To God: Listening On Location - 8th October 2023

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[0 : 00] Morning everyone. Morning. Good to see you. Good to see you. And as Ian mentioned at the top, we're continuing this Sunday series that we've been doing of late called Tuning Into God, in which we're exploring how we can experience and hopefully deepen our awareness of God's voice speaking to us in our lives.

And this morning, as part of this series, the topic I'd like us to explore is this one, listening on location. Now, what does that mean? Well, it's the idea that location or the physical place in which we find ourselves can sometimes be a surprisingly important factor in our ability to encounter or hear from God.

And on the one hand, though, we might immediately think, well, hang on a minute. How can place be all that important? We might be a bit sceptical about that, especially as we often emphasise the way in which God is with us all the time in every place we're in.

Wherever we are, through the Holy Spirit, the presence of God dwells inside us. And surely that would mean that we can access God anywhere, anytime. We can tune in, if you like, to God, any place and anytime.

And yep, nothing wrong with that. I believe that's wholly true. But at the same time, I'm also aware that certain places, certain locations do seem to amplify God's voice or bring in a sharper focus, the reality of God's presence with us.

[1 : 37] I mean, I'm no, it's not just me that has those moments when you walk into a particular room or building or you get a view in nature or a set of surroundings. That mean that somehow God suddenly feels a bit more present than was the case, maybe just a moment earlier.

You know, that sense might stoke up in us a sense of wonder or gratitude, might take our breath away with a view. It might bring us to tears, might prompt in us a sense of peace that otherwise wasn't there.

You know, all sorts of reactions to our surroundings are possible. But in some mysterious way, it's almost as if I think our location can sometimes become what's known as a thin place, you know, where something of heaven feels just a little bit closer to earth than it did before.

So how might that be? How might we explain that? How might these places help us to tune into God? Well, to help our thinking on this, I'm going to kick off with a passage from the book of Exodus this morning.

And the years when the ancient Israelites were wandering around the desert following their escape from Egypt, they were led, as you may know, by a guy called Moses. And in Exodus, we're told this, that Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the tent of meeting.

[3 : 05] Anyone inquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent.

As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance while the Lord spoke with Moses. Whenever people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshipped, each at the entrance to their tent.

The Lord would speak to Moses face to face as one speaks to a friend. Now, Moses, I guess we could say in a way, he seems to have this kind of hotline to God, emphasized by the fact that when he goes into this tent, a pillar of cloud would descend.

Now, I don't know how that happens. I can't really necessarily picture what that would have looked like. In my mind, it's kind of a bit like that dry ice you used to get on top of the pops in the 1980s, you know, that kind of swilling around everywhere, perhaps.

Who knows? But this cloud, however it looked, however it came about, it symbolized that God's presence was there with Moses. But I think it also meant that their conversation was meant to be private.

[4 : 27] You know, the cloud hid them from view, almost. At least until Moses would come out and share with the people what he'd heard from God. And I love that description at the end of that little passage there of God speaking to Moses as one speaks to a friend.

You know, that's a cracking picture, I think, of what prayer can be. And yet the bit I want to dwell on a little bit this morning is this verse here where it says that anyone inquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp.

You see, it seems it wasn't just Moses who was allowed to meet with God there. No, anyone of any age, any background, it seems, could inquire of God.

Anyone wanting to hear from God would go to the tent of meeting. You know, it was open to all, a particular place, it seems, of encounter and presence. Anyone inquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting.

So what might that tell us? Was it that God's presence was absent everywhere else and only confined to this tent? Well, no, as you're saying, I don't think that can be true because as the psalmist says, you know, where can I go from your spirit?

[5 : 49] Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you're there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. No, God's spirit is ever present all around us. So what made this tent of meeting so special?

Well, I wonder if it would seem that in setting up this tent outside the camp and calling it the tent of meeting, Moses was almost encouraging people or perhaps building up in them a sense of expectation that they would meet with God there.

Yes, in theory, they could pray to and seek God anywhere. But almost by intentionally taking that short walk from their own tent to this tent of meeting.

Well, you can imagine if you make that journey where you've seen pillars of cloud previously, you can imagine that each step would bring you closer, perhaps with a sense of anticipation, of excitement, maybe of adrenaline building that this was going to be a holy moment, if you like.

There's an intention on people's part in going there, a way of saying, look, I'm intentionally coming to meet with you, God. Open my heart, open my ears, my eyes, please.

[7 : 05] Almost prepare me on my little walk to this tent to be open to receive what it is you've got for me today. And I'd suggest perhaps that's an idea, something, if we don't already, that we do well to take on board as we think about how we can tune in to God.

This idea of being intentional about seeking God and asking God to speak to us. So how might we follow that example, follow that lead?

Well, I appreciate this isn't always easy, you know, particularly if we've got young kids in tow. But for example, on our way to church, whether on the walk or the scooter or the drive here, you know, those minutes, however long it takes us, those moments perhaps, if we're just literally around a corner, even if we can only manage moments getting here, I'd suggest there an opportunity for us to ask God, as we were singing earlier, to set our hearts towards you, towards God.

You know, God's not a nitpicker though. He's not going to hold it against us if we don't come here in anticipation. You know, he's fully aware of all the other pressures, maybe the social anxieties or the domestic difficulties we often have to battle just to be here, just to turn up, perhaps on a Sunday or a Monday.

But I do wonder if our ability to take on board all that God wants to give us is best served when we're able to come to places like this, expectant, you know, excited even, with the potential of hearing God's voice.

[8 : 49] And in some ways, it's a bit similar to the idea to mountaintop meetings. They seem to happen with God in the Bible quite a lot. You know, high altitude encounters where God's presence seems to be more tangible on a peak.

You know, so you've got that man Moses again meeting with God on Mount Sinai. There's Abraham hearing from God on Mount Moriah. You've got Elijah on Mount Carmel. And then there's Jesus on the mountaintop where the disciples see him transfigured and glowing in some mysterious way with God's glory.

If you think about these mountaintops, is it being on top of a mountain itself means that people are somehow closer to God? Because maybe heaven's somehow up there and we can climb a mountain and get up closer to heaven?

I don't think so. Perhaps instead. I think it might be something to do with the fact that the very exertion of climbing a mountain, you know, the anticipation that comes with nearing the summit, perhaps the view from the top and a sense of wonder at how small we might feel compared to all that we can see beneath us.

Or maybe it's all that and more which opens people up, opens us up to being more receptive to God's voice in those moments of wonder and expectation.

[10 : 13] Not just the mountain itself which makes a difference. It's more of our attitude, perhaps, when we get there. And so I wonder for you, if you think about your own life, have there been times when you've gone somewhere with the express intention of spending time with God?

I wonder what happened when you got there, how you felt when you arrived. When did you last do something like that? Or if it's been a while, I wonder where you would choose to go if you could.

That kind of place where you think, actually, yeah, I wonder if that might be a special place for me and God today. And I appreciate it's not always easy to carve out the time or the opportunity.

Indeed, it can feel like a luxury, you know, especially if we're snowed under with work or kids or ill health or caring for relatives and so on. But I think the good news is that even if we can't imagine doing something major, going to a major place, the good news is God is still able to meet us through even the smallest or the simplest of moves that we make towards him.

We don't have to climb a mountain to have a God encounter. For example, I'd suggest, and this really is something that we can all do, I'd suggest that even something as simple as looking up into the branches of a tree can be a moment out of our day when our eyes are lifted physically, yeah, but perhaps it's almost a sort of symbolic way of lifting our eyes to God and our focus can shift to the God in whose shelter we rest.

[12 : 01] I mean, thinking about nature and places and locations and so on, there is something about being under a tree, for example, which I think can open our eyes and ears to the presence of God.

I'd say that's why there's been such upset with this over recent weeks, at the felling of that sycamore tree on Hadrian's wall. You can tell, you know, yeah, trees evoke emotion.

I think because they symbolise growth and life and longevity. They're places of shelter and refuge, of shade and beauty. Trees have been there before us and they'll be after us.

You know, their lives are longer than ours often. That's why a two, three hundred year tree like this being cut down, it hurts us in some mysterious way. But equally, I think there's something in that that means perhaps trees and dwelling under them are a way in which we can encounter God.

Indeed, it may be a surprise to you in the Bible, but we read about people encountering God on quite a few occasions, simply as they sit under a tree. So there's Abraham, for example.

[13 : 17] We're told that the Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre. Sounds like a heavy metal band, trees of Mamre or something. If you need a band name, I'll claim that one for you.

But we're told here, so the Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre. Anyway, then Abraham entertains three, again, mysterious visitors. Visitors who may be angels, or perhaps some people believe, even an early way of almost seeing God as the Trinity, you know, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, three figures.

Since we're told that it was the Lord who appeared to Abraham. However, that worked out. It's interesting that we're told that Abraham invites these visitors, when they arrive, to rest under this tree.

And then whilst they ate the food he prepared, we're told Abraham also stood near them. Where? Under a tree. Being under a tree seems here to be a place not just of rest, but of encounter with God.

Or elsewhere, this time from the book of Judges, we're told this, that the angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in opera that belonged to Joash the Beersrite.

[14 : 37] Hard to say that one. Where his son Gideon was threshing wheat. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, the Lord is with you, mighty warrior. So the main thing here, the angel of the Lord came, you think, wow, that's going to be great.

And the angel came and sat down under a tree to speak with Gideon. How about this from 1 Kings 19, where the prophet Elijah, he's running away in fear of his life.

And we're told this, he says, he came to a tree, sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. I've had enough, Lord, he said. Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors.

Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once, an angel touched him and said, get up and eat. Elijah looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals and a jar of water.

He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the Lord came back a second time again, hunted his tree and touched him and said, get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.

[15 : 47] So he got up and ate and drank and was strengthened. So again, under a tree, it's a place of provision. It's a place of encounter with an angel of the Lord, a messenger of God himself.

And then one last one. If you fast forward to the life of Jesus, when he calls Philip's friend, a guy called Nathaniel, to be his disciple in John 1, we read this, how do you know me?

Nathaniel asked. Then Jesus answered, I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip caught you. It's a quirky little phrase. Now, what might that tell us?

Well, again, in the Bible, it seems that the act of sitting under a tree is symbolic of an openness to God, even in an encounter with God.

Indeed, sitting under a tree is also an expression in the Bible for ways in which we might live in peace alongside each other. So back in Zechariah, we're told that when God's kingdom comes, in that day, each of you will invite your neighbor to sit under your vine and fig tree, declares the Lord Almighty.

[16 : 59] Yes, it's a symbolic picture, but it also seems to be something physically significant about looking up and dwelling under a tree for a moment as a way in which we might be connected more deeply to God's presence and to each other.

So it sounds daft, and if you're thinking this all sounds a bit tree-huggy, I understand that, but try it. I don't know when the last time you sat or you dwelt under a tree.

Try it. Next time you walk through the park, you know, if you're down a tree-lined street, even in your garden, if you're lucky to have one and if you're lucky to have a tree or two, stand under it for a moment.

Lift your eyes. Take a breath from that oxygen which a tree will give us. Take a moment to thank God for his shelter, for the life we have.

And as you rest under that tree, just see what thoughts, what ideas perhaps come back to you. In fact, in all of this, I do wonder if the very act of resting for a moment under a tree might not in some profound way connect us to the idea of dwelling at the foot of the cross.

[18 : 14] You know, the tree on which Jesus was crucified so that we might know life. Indeed, if we allow God to speak to us through our location, you know, we're often asking for sort of prayer prompts for things.

I wonder if every tree we walk under might then become for us a reminder of the way in which the cross is the true tree of life for us and for our world.

See what you think on that one. See what you think next time you go for a walk and pass under a tree. But then that leads me on to a final angle on this idea of encountering or listening to God on or in particular locations.

You see, just as I'd say, every tree we walk under can be a reminder if we allow it to be a reminder for us of the cross. So too, I'd suggest that God can use new or different locations in a kind of repeating way.

Perhaps different locations as reminders of previous times, previous locations when we've been particularly aware of God's presence with us.

[19 : 27] For example, one place, one location that has been particularly significant for me in my faith journey with God is a stretch of beach on the sea, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Now, this is a little video I took. I've mentioned this before, but it was on this beach on a visit to Israel some 15 years ago now that I felt God saying to me that this vicar stuff could be a goer.

And so I took a little video of it 15 years ago to help me to remember that encounter I felt with God in that location. And you see, this location, it's the same stretch of the shore at which the resurrected Jesus was cooking breakfast and met with Peter after he'd denied knowing Jesus.

And if you know the story, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him in a Jesus way perhaps of confirming that Peter was both forgiven and free to follow Jesus afresh.

Well, on the day that I was here, at the time this 15 years ago I was wrestling with God about whether or not I could or should or even wanted to be a vicar.

[20 : 53] And I was just talking to God praying it through on this shore and the significance of the place wasn't lost on me. But then I simply sensed in a bit like I was talking about the other week I sensed God saying to me Matt, do you love me?

Do you love me? And it's the same question he asked Peter on that same shore you know, 2,000 years earlier. And I said, yeah, you know I love you, God. And that was it.

But my sense of peace that came with that was almost God giving me what I felt was a thumbs up to do this. Almost, well, if you love me that's good enough for me. Go for it. And I kind of took that as confirmation that God would give me what I needed to indeed make a go of this role.

Fast forward 15 years to now though and over this summer and this is confession time if I'm honest I've been having some significant wobbles about whether I can or indeed should be doing this this vicar job still.

There's still so much I love about doing it and being here in particular but it can be a draining and a difficult job and the last thing I want to do ever is overstay my welcome either with you or with God more importantly.

[22 : 21] And yet tuning in and being open and working out what God might be saying is tricky especially when I've got some people in this church telling me how much they appreciate me and that they love being here while others in this church have said to me that some of the things I say when I preach make them feel physically sick.

Taking that criticism on the chin weighing up where God might be in that kind of all too honest feedback that's testing in trying to discern and tune in to God's voice to say the least.

And so I went away for a few days last month on my own to the Isle of Bute in Scotland a proper getaway from everything I don't know if you've been to the Isle of Bute there's not a lot there really it's perfect for me and my introvert self I tell you but it's beautiful and I went kind of there really with that kind of tent of meeting hope that I might get some clarity from God about where I'm at and what I should be doing and on one day I went for a long walk across the island and I ended up here at a pretty deserted beach which was so picturesque it was just so beautiful we know it's that hot weather beginning of September it was that it was like 25 degrees in Scotland which is unusual but it was a cracking day so beautiful so peaceful and yet as I stood on that beach on the shore in Scotland it was like deja vu for me as something of that particular location whether it's the calmness of the water the curve of the bay this view here reminded me of the shore of the Sea of Galilee some 15 years earlier if we do a bit of photoshop and merge those two photos together you'll pick up the resonance if you like of that location and so as that previous conversation with God came to mind you know that do you love me one that came to mind at the same time

I'm also asking God and telling God see I'm not sure I can cope with this job at the moment much longer I simply felt God saying to me in that same voice it's going to be alright you know it's going to be alright and I took from that a sense of you know keep going I've got you not going to let you fall it's going to be alright and so here we are here we are and until you or I hear otherwise I'll take that as God's voice for now but my point is that God seems to have used a new location to trigger a memory in me of an older location but that through those two places through that connection of place I believe God was able to speak to me in a way which enabled me to tune in afresh to his voice as for me what might we draw from this well it seems to me that the God who meets us in a tent the God who can speak to us under a tree the God who came to be with us in

Jesus and the God who is ever present with us by his spirit well that God our God is very much grounded in and speaking through the locations of life in which we find ourselves so God is speaking to us all the time in all sorts of ways not least I would suggest through our surroundings and the places in which we live this life with him so my prayer for you on this sunny day my prayer for me is that we would increasingly tune in to the God who speaks listening on location to that voice of love in our lives Amen Amen