

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Baptism of the Lord
January 11,2026
Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

"When God Speaks"

Do you remember the TV commercial of the 1980's for the investment broker, E. F. Hutton? There was a party with a room full of people, all carrying on very noisy conversations. Off to one side is a man who says rather softly, "Well, my broker is E. F. Hutton. And E. F. Hutton says....." and just then everyone at the party stops everything they're doing and leans toward the man so that they can hear what he has to say. The commercial ends with the catchy phrase: "When E. F. Hutton speaks, people listen." I note however, that perhaps E. F. Hutton did a little too much speaking and not enough listening, since they went out of business in the 90's.

At any rate, that's the image that comes to mind when I read this passage from Matthew describing the baptism of Jesus. Jesus approaches John the Baptist asking to be baptized in the Jordan River. After John protests that Jesus should be the one doing the baptizing, he relents and baptizes Jesus in the river. When Jesus comes up from the river the Spirit of God descends on him in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven says.... And just then everybody stops what they're doing, leans to one side, cups a hand to their ear, and listens as God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

When God speaks.....,people should listen! Do we? Do we really listen when God speaks to us? Do we even know when God speaks to us? I don't know for sure how it is in your life, but I can tell you that I rarely know when God speaks to me. How nice it would be if the sky were to open up for us like it did for Jesus, the Holy Spirit were to come down like a dove, and a voice were to say, "This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." But if that were to happen, we wouldn't need preachers, or therapists or Facebook!

Of course, sometimes God does tell people who they are with dramatic, unambiguous experiences like the one at Jesus' baptism. But most of us content ourselves with less dramatic revelations, so ambiguous, veiled and quiet that we often miss them if we're not careful. That's the way God speaks to most of us.

I read of an instance when a New England woman, who was a Unitarian, was surprised by a life-changing, earthshaking, mystical experience of God. She said her revelation was

wonderful but she hadn't been able to bring herself to tell anyone at her church about it because, "Unitarians don't believe in stuff like that." That's so typical of God's sense of humor: giving a rip-roaring, earth-shattering experience to a New England Unitarian who can't tell anybody about it rather than some Presbyterian who would love to tell everybody about it.

Several years ago, Morton Kelsey, a Christian who has written numerous books on spirituality, randomly surveyed a group of Americans and found that a **majority** of those surveyed reported having had a mystical experience of God. Does that surprise you? The majority also told Kelsey that they had never told anybody about it and that the last person they would tell is their pastor because, "The pastor would think I was crazy." What is sad about that mis-perception is that most pastors are not eager to hear about encounters with God. We are, after all, in the vision business.

I don't think visions and encounters with God are rare; I think revealing them is rare. The story of the dove and the voice at Jesus' baptism is thrilling and wondrous because it is so unusual. And yet, after fifty years of listening to people who have encountered God, I am struck by how usual, mundane and ordinary is the sound of God's voice. From what I have observed, most of the time there is not a voice from above, but a voice from within. The voice speaks so clearly that a person knows it is God, and yet so ambiguously that there are dozens of ways to explain it other than as the voice of God, so a person must respond to the voice on faith rather than on complete certainty.

In my ministry I have had dozens, perhaps even hundreds of conversations with other clergy about how they discerned God's call to them. What has been most striking is how utterly ordinary was the voice they heard. To be sure, some ministers gave up lucrative or promising careers in other fields, and everyone, including spouses and children, made significant sacrifices in order to attend seminary. But the voice to which they responded with this major commitment was normally quite unspectacular. Numerous ministers tell of someone in their home church coming up to them after church and telling them they think they ought to be a preacher. Others speak of books they read, a remark by a professor in the middle of a history class, a grandmother, or sometimes, a pastor. Mostly mundane and quite ordinary - nothing at all like what happened to Jesus.

Some time ago, I read of a church executive who told of growing up in a church in Charleston, South Carolina. When he was asked how he decided to become a minister, he replied, "I didn't decide. I was told that I should be one." "By God," the questioner asked, "God told you?" "No," he responded, "by some of God's people."

"I must have been nine or ten years old," he continued. "Some of us kids were standing around in the hallway between Sunday School and church and some of the elders came by and they got to talking about us, what we would become when we grew up. 'Now Sarah,' they said. 'Sarah is going to be a teacher. She is good with the books. Jonathan will be a carpenter. He can make anything he likes.'" "What about Reuben?" somebody asked. 'Oh, Rueben, he'll be a preacher. He's got the head of a preacher. Look at that head.'" Rueben said, "They took my head and everybody examined it and said, 'You're right. He's going to be a preacher.'" And then Reuben continued, "I was twenty-four years old and a student at Boston University School of Theology before I found out that everyone had not gone to seminary the way I had." I'm not sure what the head of a preacher looks like and I'm not inviting you to examine my head, or mess with my hair!

My call to ministry came without fanfare and through quiet conversations with members and the Pastor of my church. It started off simply enough with a question – “Have you ever thought about becoming a Pastor?” Initially, I thought that was my pastor’s question, but in actuality, it was God’s question. That simple question set things in motion for a 19-year-old and I’ve never regretted God’s call on my life.

I imagine that you have had your own callings that you thought were pretty ordinary, but which led you unexpected places. God is notorious for whispering to us rather than shouting at us. The prophet Elijah was running for his life and away from God when he experienced a “Still small voice,” of God that led him back into service with God. That’s more how God works with us – nudging us to do something outside our comfort zone. When you see a need and something tells you to do something about it, that is probably God calling you. Don’t be so quick to chalk it up to lack of sleep or indigestion.

God's call, the divine response to the "Who am I?" question that all of us ask, doesn't usually come falling out of heaven. So, we have to listen, really listen for it. And let's be clear that we are not talking about the call of God as if it is something that happens only to preachers. At our baptism, each of us is called to be a disciple, to try to do God's will, to search after God's desire for our lives. All Christians share that call to minister. The fact that some disciples are called to be pastors doesn't change the call of every Christian, each in his or her own place, to be a minister of Jesus Christ.

Later this month we will install an Elder and a Deacon. We do that because we believe each has felt a call of God to serve in a particular way. They may have thought that they were called by the nominating committee of this congregation, but in fact they were called by God. The fact that God has called certain members to serve in particular ways does not

take the rest of us off the hook either. Together, we are Providence Presbyterian Church, "Forging a community of faith through worship, connection and service."

God is moving among us in some new ways. A year ago we didn't have Tamil Church worshipping in our building; we didn't have six new members; we didn't have ten members trained in CPR and the use of Automatic Emergency Defibrillators; we didn't have teenagers leading worship; and we didn't have a part-time regular (not necessarily "normal") Pastor. Through all these things and even more, God is calling us to live out our faith by serving in Parker and beyond.

God speaks to each and every one of us, mostly through the mundane and ordinary, so listen up! And what God says is what has been said to would-be disciples dating back to the call of Peter and Andrew, "Come, follow me." Unlike E. F. Hutton, God never goes out of business. When God speaks, we listen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being where you are. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen