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Little Christian Lies: Thus Says the Lord

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We're continuing our series *Little Christian Lies*—those well-meaning phrases, assumptions, and “truths” that sound holy but don't quite line up with the full picture of God's love and how God actually works.

Today's lie stems from the ways we talk about faith. For something so mysterious, we use a lot of concrete language. We talk more about “seeing” and “hearing” God than “feeling” or “experiencing” God's presence.

Even the disciples were confused about this. They ask Jesus, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty and care for you?” They forgot about the image of God in one another and the mysterious ways in which God works in our lives.

So, as we talk about this lie (which I realized I haven't named yet), open your minds to feel, your ears to perceive, and your hearts to wonder. Think about the language you use to describe the ways you encounter the divine and whether there may be “better” descriptions to use.

As Jo mentioned last week, we'll be following the Revised Common Lectionary as we unpack these lies. While we'll mainly focus on the Isaiah passage for today, all four of the readings contain insights into today's lie. I'll sprinkle bits of the other passages into today's message, and I encourage you to look them up and read them in full as well.

Before I read, please pray with me:

God, your Word directs every step we take. Help us listen closely to your Word as it is read and preached today. May we be open to hearing your voice in order to better understand your message and follow your will. Amen.

Friends, hear what the Spirit is saying to the church as I read from the book of Isaiah:

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

¹The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

¹⁰Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ¹¹What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. ¹²When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; ¹³bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation-I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. ¹⁴Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

¹⁸Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. ¹⁹If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; ²⁰but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Isaiah 1 is harsh. God addresses the people of Jerusalem by calling them “Sodom” and “Gomorrah.” That’s like a preacher today beginning a sermon with, “Good morning, you wicked rulers! Listen up, evil ones!” It’s meant to jar the listener awake.

Then come the words: *“Hear the word of the Lord... Listen to the teaching of our God.”*

In our modern imagination, when we hear that phrase, we might picture Isaiah taking out a notepad, hearing a voice from the clouds, and writing down exactly what God says, syllable for syllable. That’s the “little Christian lie.”

In reality, the ancient prophets didn’t operate like court stenographers. They were more like composers—rooted in a deep encounter with God, shaped by prayer and vision, they then expressed God’s message in language that was vivid, memorable, and culturally grounded.

Though it’s possible, when Isaiah says, *“Thus says the Lord,”* he’s claiming to give us an audio recording of God’s literal speech. It may be more helpful to hear him say, “This is the message God has burned into my heart for you. This is the truth I believe the Spirit is speaking in our time and place.” These classical prophets often spoke of the spirit as a force that led them to proclaim the word of the Lord.

But if we’re not meant to read it as a direct quotation, what does that mean for the authority of scripture? In my opinion, it strengthens it—because it reveals the way God chooses to work through human beings.

The God of Israel does not bypass human voices; God inhabits them. God doesn't drop holy manuscripts from the sky; God breathes through the lives, imaginations, and words of prophets, poets, apostles, humans.

And because we know this, we approach Scripture not as a magical transcript but as a living conversation. We wrestle with it. We study its history. We pay attention to how its themes connect to the cries of our own time. We read with humility, knowing the Spirit is still speaking.

If we cling to the myth that “*Thus says the Lord*” is always a verbatim quotation, we risk two problems:

1. **We might stop doing the hard work of interpretation.** If we think every sentence is a perfect transcript, we can be tempted to wield Scripture like a hammer instead of a scalpel—quoting it without questioning it, without wrestling with context, translation, or the arc of God's justice.
2. **We might miss God's fresh word.** If God once spoke through human interpretation, why wouldn't God still do that? Why wouldn't the Spirit still inspire ordinary people to speak God's truth today?

When we realize Isaiah was speaking God's truth in *his* cultural moment, it opens the possibility that God is speaking in *ours*—through voices we may or may not expect.

Psalms 50 reminds us that God's voice is continuous. It opens by saying, “¹The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting...
³Our God comes and does not keep silence.”

From the rising to the setting of the sun, God is in conversation with us. God did not speak in the past tense, but God speaks in the present tense. God does not keep silent but instead sends the Spirit to speak to us in a multitude of ways.

Which brings us to our second little Christian lie: that the voice of God for us here and now is always loud, clear, and unmistakable. It booms with depth and authority like Morgan Freeman on surround sound.

This idea has some biblical precedent. God's voice thunders at Sinai. Jesus hears a voice at his baptism. But if we think that's the *only* way God speaks, we will spend most of our lives waiting for a sound that never comes.

The truth is, Scripture shows God speaking in many ways:

- A burning bush, yes, but also a whisper on the wind.
- A talking donkey, yes, but also the counsel of a friend.
- Angelic choirs, yes, but also the cry of a child.

Hebrews 11 reminds us that faith is about trusting what we cannot see—and I'd add, trusting what we cannot always *hear* in a literal way. Abraham set out for an unknown land not because a voice boomed from heaven every morning with GPS directions, but because he had learned to recognize the quieter nudges of God's call.

So, if God's voice is not always obvious, how do we listen for God?

Our experiences in hearing God's voice vary. And some may actually hear a big, booming voice while others may not. And

that's the beauty of the ways that God individually relates to each of us.

In preparation for this sermon, I did a bit of research on the ways people say they hear from God on the social media platform Reddit. Now, Reddit is not a scholarly source – some may even say it's the opposite. But Reddit is a place where people go to share real thoughts and experiences. As I searched, I encountered a wide variety of answers. Here are some of the most popular and some you may be familiar with.

The first is through scripture. We know that scripture is the living word of God. The Bible is not simply a history book for looking back. The words on the page are alive and inspired by the breath of the Spirit. That's why you can read the same passage at different points in life and hear something entirely new.

Sometimes God's voice in scripture affirms. Sometimes it challenges. Sometimes it disrupts. But when we read with open hearts, the Spirit still whispers through those ancient words.

In many ways, we hear the voice of God in the same ways as those we read about in scripture. Another example: dreams.

This summer, I attended the Presbyterian Youth Triennium – a gathering of thousands of high school youth and their leaders that occurs every 3 years. This year's theme, "As If We Were Dreaming," included daily stories of Biblical dreamers – Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and more, and challenged youth to dream with God. Awake or asleep, youth considered the ways God speaks with us through dreams.

They shared stories of encounters with God in their dreams as they slept as well as their awakened dreams for themselves, their lives, and the world.

One preacher at Triennium described the week as a “revival,” and by the end of the week, we were in agreeance. It was clear the Spirit was at work, and we were excited to go back into the world as dreamers. These teens were ready to be devout, to worship, to follow God, to go back into the world as doers of the word.

Like them, Isaiah’s audience was devout. They were worshiping, sacrificing, praying. And God says: *Enough! Why?* Because their religion wasn’t translating into justice. Their rituals were spotless, but their hands were stained with neglect of the vulnerable.

God’s voice in Isaiah 1 is not just a critique or condemnation—it’s an invitation into conversation. “Come now, let us argue it out,” God says. God is not just this big, booming voice shouting from afar and disappearing; God calls us into conversation, into active relationship and transformation.

So when we listen for God, we need to talk too! The conversation is not just one-sided. The way we most often engage in conversation with God is through prayer. When we pray, are we leaving room for God to speak? Or are we just talking, talking, talking, amen, and move on?

In our prayers and meditations, we need to leave room for God to respond. God wants to engage with us in that way. So leave room for silence, be intentional about listening for what God is saying to you.

Another way that people talk about hearing God is through others.

For me personally, I often “hear” God most strongly in the voices of others. In conversation with mentors and friends, themes become apparent, and I begin to wonder what the Spirit is saying to me.

One example of this is my journey to seminary. For a very long time, people have been telling me to go to seminary, and for a very long time, I have been saying “no.” I did not want to, I did not feel called to, I was afraid to. But I admittedly always knew in the back of my mind that seminary was a possibility.

A few years ago, I attended a conference where the keynote speaker talked about creativity, innovation, and risk in faith formation. The topic was extremely relevant as that is what I strive to do every day here in my work with our children and families. How can we be creative and take risks and innovate so that we can continue to evolve in the ways that we interact with God and energize the faith of the next generation?

I loved everything she had to say, and at the end of the week I told her so. I knew that she was a seminary professor and said, “What you’re doing is amazing, I wish I could be a part of it.” When she responded that I certainly could, I gave my list of all the reasons it wasn’t possible. And she had something to counter for each of those reasons.

In our brief conversation, she also said a lot of the same things that I had been hearing from others for years about why I should go to seminary. But her voice was a new voice. She had

not known me for years. She did not watch me grow up. And yet, I opened myself to God's Spirit speaking through her. After that brief conversation, I had a three-hour car ride home where I began to wonder "what else is God calling me to?" And in the silence, I conversed with God, speaking and listening for God's voice. And I still hear God speaking through her to me now. She encouraged me to continue my education and challenges me to continually discern God's call for me.

If we expect God's voice only in the dramatic, we might miss it in the ordinary:

- In the gentle conviction that we should speak up for someone at work.
- In the hymn verse that lingers in our mind all week.
- In the holy discontent that pushes us to volunteer, advocate, or forgive.

Jesus in Luke 12 urges his disciples to stay alert—to be ready for the master's return. That readiness isn't about scanning the skies for thunderclouds and a voice from on high. It's about tuning our hearts so we can hear God in the unexpected, the quiet, the everyday. And engaging God in conversation.

If we drop these two little lies, we can begin to listen for God in richer, truer ways.

- We'll see "Thus says the Lord" as an inspired human witness to God's truth—not a frozen transcript, but a living testimony.
- We'll listen for God's voice in the quiet as well as the thunder, in the margins as well as the mountaintop. Through the people around us and the ways we interact with the world.

And that will change how we respond. Because once you start hearing God in the cry for justice, in the laughter of children, in the stillness before dawn—you realize God's been speaking all along.

The good news is that God still speaks. Not just in ancient times, not just through perfect transcripts, not just in loud voices—but here, now, through Scripture, through community, through the Spirit at work in the world.

The question isn't *whether* God is speaking. The question is: Are we listening? Are we willing to be surprised by the forms God's voice takes?

And when we dare to say, "*Thus says the Lord*"—in our preaching, our activism, our everyday living—may it be not just words, but a life that speaks of God's justice, mercy, and love.

Benediction

Friends, God is still speaking—through the pages of scripture, the movement of the Spirit, the voice of the community, the beauty of creation, and yes, even in the silence.

Our call is to be people who listen—not for the sake of having mystical experiences, but so that we might live faithfully, love generously, and join God's work in the world.



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