

## NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

A Pierced Ear  
Mark Batterson

On December 26, 2004, the third largest earthquake ever recorded by seismograph erupted 10 miles beneath the Indian Ocean. It registered 9.1 magnitude on the Richter scale. It generated the energy equivalent of 23,000 atomic bombs and the shockwaves produces tsunami waves measuring over 100 feet in height traveling 500 miles an hour reaching a radius of 3,000 miles. That earthquake tragically claimed the lives of 227,898 people. But there was one people group living right in the path of the tsunami who somehow survived without a single casualty. The Moken are an Austronesian ethnic group. They lived their lives on the open seas from birth to death. They are sea- based nomads. Their boats are their homes. Their children learn to swim before they learn to walk. They see twice as well under water as we do. And as you would imagine, they have an intimacy with the ocean. They read ocean waves the way we read books. On the day that the Indian Ocean earthquake hit, an amateur photographer from Bangkok was taking pictures of the Moken. There was a moment when the sea began to recede and the Moken began to cry. They knew what was about to happen. The birds had stopped chirping. The elephants headed towards high ground and the dolphins were swimming farther out to sea. The Moken, who were near the coast of Thailand, beached their boats and hiked to the highest elevation. Those who were out to sea went farther out to sea to deep ocean where they knew that the tsunami crest would be minimalized as it past them. The Moken survived because they knew how to look and they knew how to listen and they knew a language that others did not.

Six times in the gospels, eight times in the book of Revelation, Jesus says something. Six words and there is an urgency to the exhortation and I think the implications are exponential. He says whoever has ears let them hear. And He is not just talking about the audible voice of God within the human range of hearing.

This weekend we continue the series Whisper, how to hear the voice of God. The first language is Scripture is it is in a category by itself. II Timothy 3:16 says that all Scripture is God breathed. When we open the Bible, God opens his mouth and He whispers to us through his Word. But there are six secondary languages that God speaks through n Scripture. Let me tell you what they are. The first language is the language of desire. Psalm 37:4 says delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart. The word give in Hebrew means to conceive. In other words, God will birth new desires within you. I think we have this mistaken notion that if we do what God wants He is going to send us somewhere we don't want to go to do what we don't want to do and we might be miserable. Listen, that is not the heart of God. That is not the way God works. Now, we have to be careful. There are sinful desires and there are selfish desires but when we delight ourselves in the Lord, when we seek first his kingdom, what happens is God sanctifies our desires. He gives us new desires so that those desires actually become compass needles that point us towards God's good, pleasing and perfect will.

The second language is the language of dreams. Acts 2:17 says

*I will pour out my Spirit on all people, your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.*

When God fills you with his Spirit, dreams are the supernatural by-product. God wants to anoint your right brain imagination. He wants to give you what I call God ideas and I would rather have a God idea than a thousand good ideas. God whispers, God works in those 86 billion neurons that crisscross the human mind.

The third language is the language of doors. One of my most prayed promises is Revelation 3:7-8

*What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. <sup>8</sup> I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.*

Let me say this, you love open doors. But closed doors? Not so much. But it is a package deal. And the older I get I realize that someday we will probably thank God even more for the closed doors than the open doors.

The fourth language is the language of people. God used a prophet named Nathan to rebuke a king named David. He used an uncle named Mordecai to exhort a queen named Esther and He used a spiritual father named Paul to encourage Timothy. Numbers 11:29 says

*I wish all the Lord's people were prophets.*

God wants to speak to you through others and He wants to speak to others through you. It is the language of people.

The fifth language is the language of prompting. Isaiah 30:21 says

*Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying this is the way, walk in it.*

Scripture is our map and the Holy Spirit is our guide. God is ordering your footsteps. He is preparing good works in advance. But we have to discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit if we want to get where God wants us to go.

Finally the sixth secondary language is the language of pain. CS Lewis said that God whispers to us in our pleasures but He shouts in our pain. You know what, you could ignore the Bible, you can leave it on the shelf but you know what you can't ignore? Pain. Listen, pain is a by-product of the curse. Genesis 3. And the day is coming when there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. Revelation 20. In the meantime, we better listen to pain. Pain is a marriage counselor. Pain is a life coach. Pain is a professor of theology. Pain teaches us some of the toughest lessons but some of the most important lessons we can learn.

Let me go back to this phrase, whoever has ears, let them hear. Jesus is not talking just about physical ears. This isn't about the audible voice of God in the human range of hearing. This is

about learning to discern God's voice in these different ways. It is discerning desires and dreams and doors. It is reading people and promptings and pain. And that is easier said than done but that's what Whisper is all about.

Author Diane Ackerman tells a funny story about traveling from her home in Waukegan, Illinois to Fayetteville, Arkansas. She had heard about the hot springs and so when she got there, she asked her host in a Midwestern accent if there was a spa. She immediately knew that something got lost in translation. With a confused look on her face and a pretty thick southern accent, the host said spas? You mean Russian spas? It might have got lost in translation again just now. Spa? Spy? Potato? Potato? We generally hear what we want to hear. We don't actually hear what is being said. Is that not the problem with most relationships? And it is true in a relationship with God too. Sometimes it is what we want to hear least that we want to hear the most. And if we aren't willing to listen to everything God has to say, eventually we won't hear anything He has to say.

Let me zoom out for a moment. Studies have found that different countries hear differently. The French ear hears best between 1,000 and 2,000 hertz. The British bandwidth is a little bit larger between 2,000 and 12,000 hertz. The American ear hears best between 750 hertz and 3,000 hertz. In other words, there is a French ear, there is a British ear and there is an American ear. Can I suggest that there is a Catholic ear, a Baptist ear, a Pentecostal ear? There is a Democratic ear and a Republican ear. There is a male ear and a female ear. Some would suggest that one works and the other doesn't! We listen through the filter. We listen through the filter of our history. Our personality, our theology, and that sometimes makes it very difficult to actually hear what God is saying.

When Jesus said whoever has ears let them hear, here is what the Jewish ear would have heard. They would have heard an echo of Psalm 40:6

*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire. But my ears you have opened.*

The Hebrew word for open is archeological. It means to excavate. It means to dig through dense material. But it also means to pierce, which has led many Bible scholars to believe that David was tipping his cap to an ancient ritual that was outlined at Mount Sinai. After serving for six years, Hebrew servants would be set free in the seventh year. But if that servant loved that master so much that he did not want his freedom, he was given the option of becoming a servant for life, and the physical symbol of that ancient ritual was a pierced ear. Exodus 21:6

*He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.*

The Latin word for obey means to give ear. It is literally giving God your ear and saying, God, you get the first word and the last word. It is saying, God, you are going to be the loudest voice in my life. It is listening to God's whisper even if a thousand people are screaming something different. Why? Because you have a pierced ear. You have an ear that has been consecrated to the Lord Jesus Christ. Surrendering yourself to his Lordship starts with a pierced ear.

Over the past decade, I have recorded about a dozen audio books with the same sound engineer. We've become friends. Brad is good at what he does. One day we were having lunch in the middle of one of those recordings and he shared something with me that I didn't know. He said that standard operating procedure for sound mixers in the film and music industries before going into the studio, they let their ears relax and recalibrate through absolute silence. Acoustic ecologists call the process ear cleaning. By definition, white noise is a sound that contains every frequency the human ear can hear and because it contains every frequency, it is very difficult to hear any frequency, especially the still, small voice of God. Listen, chronic noise is one of the greatest impediments to our spiritual growth.

Here's what I know for sure. Your life is too loud and your schedule is too busy! And that is how and why and when we forget that God is God. In the words of John Donne, the English poet and clergymen, he said I neglect God and his angels for the noise of a fly. We are so easily distracted.

To fully appreciate what Jesus said, I think a little ear anatomy might help. When sound waves hit our ears, they travel through a labyrinth that Diane Ackerman describes as a miniature golf course. The outer ear functions like a funnel that catches the sound and then it travels through the ear canal and hits the ear drum and those vibrations bump into three of the tiniest bones in the human body. From there those vibrations spiral through a snail shaped tube that contain the cochlea and it contains thousands of microscopic hear cells that amplify sound along the way. From there, the eighth cranial nerve transmits impulses almost like Morse code to the auditory cortex and that is where pitch and volume and tone and distance and direction and meaning are translated into actionable information. Can I just pause right here and say we are fearfully and wonderfully made? And when we read verses like Proverbs 20:12, ears that hear and eyes that see, the Lord has made them both, and we don't even stop to think about it. What a miracle!

When I played basketball in college, no matter how many people were yelling and screaming, I could somehow always hear my dad's voice. A few weeks ago, when I ran the Chicago marathon, a million there to cheer for me, and the other 45,000 runners in that race, do you know who I heard? Lora and Summer and Josiah. One of the most mysterious capabilities of the human ear is the ability to tune out certain sounds while tuning others in. And the reason is because we actually hear things twice. Audiologically, there is a short time delay between sound waves hitting the outer ear and the then reaching the inner ear. So I go back to what Jesus said and it makes me think. I mean, how often are we guilty of just listening to God with our outer ear? And it is in one ear and out the other, and God is saying I'm speaking to you. I'm giving you this desire. I'm closing that door. This dream is from me. I'm using this person to speak. That prompting is from me. Would you listen to the pain? So God is speaking but so often, it is just the outer ear. And I think part of what Jesus is saying is you have to listen with the inner ear. You have to listen twice.

If you are anything like me, it is usually the critical remarks that seem to get to the inner ear and that is how they get in our spirit, and they echo, don't they? And sometimes it is our own negative self-talk and we beat ourselves up over and over and God is saying, hey, by the way, your sin is forgiven and forgotten, now if you could just forgive yourself and maybe forget for a minute, then we can get about our business. I think sometimes we let the wrong thing get in our

spirits and it starts with an ear that is pierced. And that means tuning some things out so that we can tune in the voice of God.

Let me switch gears a little bit. This is tough to talk about because it is hard for me to even know how to define it for you and what it might look like in your life but Henry Nouwen said silence, silence is an act of war against the competing voices within us and around us. Some of you need to go to war with some of those competing voices. I love what else he said, when you listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls you the Beloved, you will discover within yourself a desire to hear that voice longer and more deeply.

So here's my prayer for you, Psalm 46:10

*Be still and know that I am God.*

There is a story told about European missionaries who went to Africa and they hired some of the locals to guide them to where they wanted to go. Well, those guides went at a slower pace than what the missionaries wanted and so after the first two days, they pushed the pace. On day three, they went twice as fast and went twice as far as day two. The missionaries were thrilled with the progress but on day four, their guides refused to break camp. The missionaries asked them what was wrong and the guide simply said, we went so quickly yesterday that we must wait here for our souls to catch up with us.

I need my soul to catch up with me. If there is anything I learned from running that marathon, it is that you better run at a sustainable pace if you want to finish the race. And I also know how driven I am. So this is a tough sermon to preach because I'm not great at this, but I'm trying.

I went too fast to get to here and I'm guessing some of you feel the same way. Isn't it interesting how often we try to just manufacture the miracle? And our default setting is ASAP, as soon as possible. We want God to do what God does yesterday. And the process is so hard for us. But sometimes less is more. Sometimes slower is faster. Sometimes quieter is louder.

For the past 30 years, an acoustic ecologist named Gordon Hempton has compiled what he calls the list of the last great quiet places. It consists of places with at least 15 minutes of uninterrupted quiet during daylight hours. At last count, there were 12 quiet places in the entire United States. And we wonder why the soul suffers. As Hempton noted, quiet is a think tank of the soul. Simply put, I think God speaks loudest when we are quietest.

Let me close with this. One of the most played pieces of classical music is Beethoven's Symphony Number Five in C Minor, immediately recognizable because of that four note motif, the iconic opening. But did you know that it actually begins with an eighth rest? Beethoven put it right at the beginning of the symphony and I don't know exactly what Beethoven was thinking, I know it was very unique when he did it, but I do know this, that eighth rest was a sonic buffer. If you've been to a concert, you know that there is some ambient noise at the beginning. There is conversation between concert goers and there are a few stragglers trying to find their seat, usually in the middle of the row, right? And there is the rustling of programs and I wonder if he wanted a bit of silence at the beginning of this symphony as a form of ear cleaning. All I know is

this, we probably need more eighth rests, don't we. And I don't know exactly what that looks like for you. Social media is white noise and if it is the first thing we check every morning and the last thing we check every night, as is the case for many of us many mornings and many nights, then I wonder if that is one way we are actually deafening ourselves to the voice of God? Whatever you listen to most, the volume is going to get turned up. I don't know if you can afford to do this but maybe a two day silent retreat wouldn't hurt. But even if you can't do that, somehow finding a way to put an eighth rest at the beginning of your day, I bet it will be more of a symphony. Putting an eighth rest at the end of your day might help you go to sleep a little bit better.

Alright, I have two conclusions. Here's the second one. There are really two ways to read the Bible. Reading the Bible for breadth is called *lectio continuum*. I think back to our Long Story Short series, 13 weeks through the books of the Bible. It is reading for breadth. The goal is to get the big picture. And listen, that is important. There is this thing called hermeneutics, it is the science of interpreting Scripture and the most basic principle of hermeneutics is this, let Scripture interpret Scripture. You have to let the Old and New Testaments do a little dance. You have to let different principles and different passages juxtapose with one another because text without context is pretext. So *lectio continuum* is important. You have to have the big picture. But there is a second kind of reading and I think it is more of an inner ear kind of reading. It is *lectio Divina*. Reading without meditating is like eating without digesting. I think the Bible was meant to be meditated on and prayed through and contemplated on. *Lectio Divina* has been likened to a meal. There are four steps. Jot these down if you want. It has been likened to a meal and I rather like that analogy. Can I tell you what I did on Tuesday night? When the book releases, we have a little habit that we do a dinner celebration and I felt like it had been a little too long since I had been to Fogo de Chao! Any restaurant that hands you a green card that says yes please and that comes to the table with 13 cuts of meat and that serves these cheese rolls, 16 of which I ate, don't judge me! I ran a marathon three weeks ago! I am still in the grace period! That meal was *lectio Divina*! There was this one lady, bless her heart, one of our servers, she came around with bottom sirloin wrapped in bacon! I feel like crying right now. She would come to the table and I eventually just started clapping every time she came by! Do we enjoy the Bible like that? In fact, let me just take one step back and say you tell me how much you enjoy God and I will tell you how spiritually mature you are. Many of us still relate to God out of this place of fear. But perfect love casts out all fear. Listen, these languages are love languages. You don't need to be afraid of what God is going to say. He loves you! When you succeed, He says, I love you. When you fail, He says I love you. When you have faith, I love you. When you doubt, I love you. I love you! It is who He is and what He does.

Alright, *lectio Divina*, reading is taking the first bite. But let's not stop there. Meditating is chewing on God's Word. It is not just reading the Bible, it is letting the Bible read you. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart but here's what I have found, just like pace of life, the pace with which you read the Bible is a good indicator. I have found, confession, when I get to parts of the Bible that I find convicting or confusing, my tendency is to speed read, to almost just read right past it. I mean, let's get to the good parts right? No, that's when we need to slow down and actually let that get into the inner ear so that we really hear what God is saying.

The third step is prayer and I think this is huge. As you pray through the Word of God, what happens is, in fact 11 times in Psalm 119, the word quicken is repeated and the psalmists says quicken thou me according to thy Word. The word quicken is the word that means physical resurrection. And it is one of the jobs of the Holy Spirit, as we read the Word, and you have to hide it in your heart first, but as you read the Word, the Holy Spirit begins to quicken it. So every time you read the Bible, there ought to be a little resurrection. He wants to bring faith and hope and love back to life. But you can't just read it and mediate it and pray it, I think you have to contemplate on it. And this is where we absorb the Word and we absorb its nutrients. It is how the Word gets from our head into our heart. It is how the Word gets from the outer ear to the inner ear.

So reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating. Lectio Divina. It is drilling down on Scripture. James 1:22

*Do not merely listen to the Word and so deceive yourselves, do what it says.*

So let me close with this. I know we focused more on the first language, Scripture but I think that is a good starting point if you want to learn to discern the voice of God. It starts with Scripture. Peter Marshall, former Chaplain of the Senate said, I wonder what would happen if we all agreed to read one of the gospels until we came to a place that told us to do something then went out to do it and only after we had done it, began reading again. I will tell you exactly what would happen, his kingdom would come! And his will would be done on earth as it is in heaven because that's what happens when hearers of the Word become doers of it. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

Let's pray.

Father help us. We want to hear your voice. We need to hear your voice. Lord there is a lot of while noise. There are a lot of competing voices. There is a lot of self-talk. But I pray that You would help us to experience an ear cleaning. God I pray that You would pierce our ears this weekend. That we would give ear to You and really begin to hear and discern, not just your voice but your heart, God. In Jesus name, Amen.