

SERMON TITLE- "God Speaks"

TEXT- Hebrews 1:1-2

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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I have mentioned it a couple of times recently. Some weeks back I engaged in a dialogue on an atheist's blog. It began when I decided I should comment on the bad attitude that was being displayed by the participants. Needless to say I got back a barrage of responses- none of them complimentary.

Most were impossible to respond but one of them challenged me to explain my belief in God. It was a good challenge. So why do I believe in God and how can I explain this to crowd of angry atheists?

As you can imagine the discussion ground down pretty quickly and I never got to the point I like to make- in order for us, as created beings, to know God- He must reveal Himself to us. It never got to that point because a certain calmness has to proceed such as search.

I wish I could have got there because I think it is the foundation of our faith. How do we really know God exists? We can't see, hear or feel Him in the normal sense of those words. He is not directly apprehensible by the 5 senses. Therefore we believe in God by the evidence of His creation. Unfortunately among atheists the statement that no such evidence exists is a presupposition. It leaves the believer quite stuck as far as a debate goes.

But the Bible makes a very interesting challenge-

And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you . . . 1 Chronicles 28:9

God Will Reveal Himself To Those Who Seek Him

What is this saying? God will be found by those who seek Him. That is a very specific promise that God gives humanity and it goes out as a challenge to those who claim that there is no God. Getting people to actually hear this was a challenge I was not able to overcome in that blog debate.

To me it is just logical that if God did indeed create everything He must be beyond the comprehension of Creation and that if this is the case- God Himself must take it on Himself to be revealed to His creation. It makes sense that God would do so to those who really seek Him.

[It also makes sense to me that if this describes God that He would no be interested in silly experiments that "prove" or disprove it.]

But interestingly the Bible actually goes beyond this- not only will God reveal Himself to those who seek Him- the Bible makes another claim-

I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, "Here am I, here am I." Isaiah 65:1

God Reveals Himself Even To Those Who Don't Seek Him

That is quite a remarkable statement. It says that even those who claim not to believe in God are also being reached out to by Him. That is a very interesting thought and worth bearing in mind when you talk to people.

The natural next question is- "So how does that happen?"

How Does God Reveal Himself?

Now if this is just a problem that I have in a debate with atheists that might be interesting- but probably not very practical. The problem of God revealing Himself, however, is also a very ordinary issue for ordinary people going through life. If there is a God out there- why is it so hard to feel like I am being heard? This is a question we have all asked and been asked- at one time or another.

I have heard the expression several times- "I need Jesus with skin on." Not just the idea that there must be a God out there.

Christmas is approaching and what makes Christmas so special is that it celebrates the visitation to the world of God Himself- through His Son Jesus. Jesus was the concrete proof of God's existence and it is captured in Hebrews 1-

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. Hebrews 1:1-2

This is an important verse because it says that while people around the world and from the beginning of time have had access to God- with the coming of Jesus- something new and special took place.

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, I thought I would do a pre-Christmas sermon looking at this business of God revealing Himself to us.

And I want to do it around the Christmas topic of the upcoming visit to the earth, by Jesus.

It starts off in a time when a lot of average people were not really looking for the Messiah. Oh the religious people who studied the ancient Scriptures knew all about the promise that a descendant of King David was supposed to appear and restore the ancient kingdom to even more than its former glory. During times of crisis the average person would think about stuff like this more often. A personal crisis always makes us ask- where is God?

But for a whole nation to ask that kind of question- it takes a national crisis. During the years around the time when Jesus was born- there was a period of significant stability of the Middle East. In Rome the Caesars had established their rulership. The Roman armies were at the height of their effectiveness. For the most part trade was free and effective. In other words- generally speaking- life was pretty good. No national crisis.

And so it was in this environment that God sent a message out that the Messiah was coming. How did He do it?

#1. Through Angels and Dreams

Before Jesus was born there were 2 very notable messages sent to people- by an angel- specifically the angel Gabriel. First Zechariah-

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God . . . an angel of the

Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. Luke 1:8-11

Zechariah would be the father of John the Baptist- the one sent to prepare the way for Jesus.

The other famous angel visitation was to Mary- **In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. Luke 1:26-27**

In some ways this kind of communication is what people associate with the Bible. The Bible is clear- God does on occasion speak through these extraordinary means but actually in the Biblical context such a way of communicating from God to people is very rare.

But it is also very personal. Zechariah was going to be the father of John the Baptist. He was asked to raise this son according to the strict Nazarite. Mary, of course was to give birth to a child conceived by the Holy Spirit and she needed very direct assurance. In both cases God sent an angel to explain what He wanted from these 2 people. When angels appear in the Bible, it is usually at times when a very detailed and personal message needs to be delivered.

But the problem with seeing angels is that it is a very personal thing and won't prove much to anyone else.

From time to time people have come to me with stories of extraordinary messages that they feel God has given them. How do I respond? Politely to be sure- but inside myself this kind of evidence doesn't have very much weight. Are these people delusional? In many cases that is indeed the case. People who hear voices or see things that no one else sees are generally not well.

For the person who has received the message it means a great deal- to anyone else it doesn't do much.

It certainly won't impress a group of skeptics. But there was another way that God communicated with people preparing them for the arrival of His Son-

#2. Through "Signs" and Scripture

The story of the Magi is one of these- **After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has**

been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" Matthew 2:1-6

This is a peculiar story as well. These Magi were almost certainly astrologers. Astrology is forbidden in the Bible because it is associated with the occult. And yet these astrologers were directed to the birth of Jesus.

What is going on here? Somehow God gave these men a sign that His Son was to be born. This sign came in a way that has no real explanation- except that it was, unlike the angel, a means that more than one person could witness.

Not only this- this message was supplemented by Scripture.

The Bible is very clear that God also speaks through a combination of Scripture and signs. This is a little less mysterious than an angel visitation- but nonetheless it is still difficult to really assess.

And yet God speaks this way- from time to time.

But by far the most common form of communication that God uses is when He speaks-

#3. Through People

Over and over again God uses people to communicate His messages. In the Christmas story it happened again and again.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! Luke 1:41-42

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of

Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people." Luke 1:67-68

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. Luke 2:20

There was also a prophetess, Anna . . . She was very old . . . Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. Luke 2:36-38

Over and over again the word that God's Son, Jesus had come to earth, was sent out. On a couple of rare occasions the message went out via angels, on other rare occasions the message went out by signs confirmed by Scripture but overwhelmingly the word of God went out through the words of people.

How does God communicate? He does communicate with people- those who seek Him, of course, but also those who don't. That is a Biblical claim.

And there is a little revelation I came to years ago as I was pondering the puzzle of God speaking to people. The revelation was this- surely if God is actually the Creator of Everything He will make sure His messages actually get through to those who are intended to receive them.

Why would I come to that revelation? Because there can be a tendency among people who want to hear from God to try to approach it like reading tea leaves or shapes in clouds. In these scenarios if you blink at the wrong time you might miss it.

Surely, I thought, if God wants me to get a message, it will not get lost in the mail. The question will be merely- do I want to hear it?

Once I discovered that truth- it did a couple of things

1. it changed my focus from looking for signs- to focusing on having an open heart.

2. I suddenly became aware how often people actually did hear from God- through other people. God speaks through people- and most often the person speaking is not aware of it at all.

What implication does such an insight have for me? I think it means that not only should I keep my heart open to hearing from God- but I must also actively be open to having Him speak through me.

Just to be very clear about this- this is not a preacher speaking. God wants to use every one of His people as agents of His message- not just when people come to church or call on a pastor when they think they need a little extra communication from God. No, God want to speak through us to the people we meet in our lives during the routines of living.

Going back to my dialogue on the atheist blog. Things quickly unfolded into an exchange of wits- of the give and take of a debate. I accused them of not actually wanting to know if there was a God and they accused me of being an idiot.

But then I thought- what kind of a channel is my communication? If behind the scenes of the debate there actually was a heart that God wanted to speak to- was what I was saying helping or hindering that?

I can't say that I came up with anything specifically different but I worked hard at not being sarcastic and clever for the sake of cleverness. But most of all- I consciously prayed as I exchanged comments.

And as we learned last week- it was not out of a sense of "at least we can pray" but rather that God does want to speak through His people in every occasion- even a wild and wooly online debate with atheists.

Does God want to reveal Himself to people? Absolutely! How does He do so? In all kinds of different way- some extraordinary- but most often in the ordinary conversations of life.

But there is one more piece in this puzzle and it is contained in a little verse in the middle of the Christmas story-

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:19

How does God reveal Himself to people?

#4. By Accumulating Evidence To Listening Hearts

When you are cornered and need to give hard evidence for something like how and why you believe in God, it can be quite a challenge.

But when you have a chance- outside of that environment you will probably find that God's revelation on

your life comes from the accumulation of all kinds of bits and pieces of His speaking. Some are dramatic, some are very personal and make no sense to anyone else, some are the words and actions of the people in your life, sometimes He speaks through you and you don't even realize.

But finally God spoke and continues to speak through Jesus. This is the word that we proclaim to those want to listen.

And it is- by the way- why Christmas is such an important celebration for God's people.

God speaks- the question is- are we listening?