Learning from the Invisible Teacher Today

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Prologue

The God who Speaks

"If truth is what you seek, you will surely find it."

The *meaning* of those words passed, unbidden, through my mind in a flash. The density and intensity of the thought were such that writing or even reading those words feels stretched out and diluted in comparison. The promise was suddenly in my mind, but I did not experience it as coming from my mind. It came from elsewhere. Then there was silence.

My face was still slightly damp. I'd returned the towel to the rack and was walking out of the bathroom. After working through the morning with, now familiar, trepidation and frustration, I had stepped out of my attic library to splash some water on my face, grab another coffee, and refocus.

For several months I had been stuck. I couldn't make any progress on my dissertation. In the background were deep worries – worries about my own competency, worries about what my new advisor expected, worries about crumbling plans which once were founded upon a fantasy of quick completion. I was stuck. And amid my paralysis I had begun to probe a different and foolish strategy.

I didn't speak it out loud to myself in its baldest form. That probably would have woken me up. But somewhere inside a thought like this was beginning to take shape, "If I could just figure out what my advisor wants, I could write that... tweak everything in that direction." It was foolish, but I was becoming increasingly desperate.

That's when God spoke. He wasn't chatty and he didn't offer any to-do list. Nor did he guide me, Siri-like, out of my slough of despair. In fact, he did not tell me to *do* anything. Instead, he provided a single promise-filled insight. That insight proved the universal solvent to my many corded tangle of impasses. "If *truth* is what you seek, you will surely find it."

The words were true north. I wrote them on a post-it note and placed it in front my writing desk. Over the course of the next few years, whenever I became perplexed on the proper direction of my project I would refocus on these words. They brought a clarity that allowed me to continue sure-footedly. "Okay. What's true here?," I'd ask myself. "Forget the noise and the fluff. Just write that true bit." Then I could plod on.

Strangely enough, it was years after the fact that I realized Jesus had spoken almost the same words before. "Seek and you shall find..."

The God who Speaks

God speaks to people. It's a basic claim of scripture – and it's specific. God is not only personal, or communicative, or revelatory. It's deeper than that. God *speaks*. Indeed, he converses with human beings. For David, the fact was striking enough to make him wonder what human beings really are (Ps. 8:4).

Moreover, the long tradition of Christianity has always borne witness to God's ongoing readiness to speak to people. There's plenty of variation in the details and manner of his speech but the fact is consistent.

At one moment the Spirit speaks, without mediator, to the thoughts of a traveling missionary. The Spirit directs him to enter or refrain from entering a region.[1] At other moments, God speaks to contemplative readers of scripture. In the midst of her reading a distinct meaning comes to her between the lines – it's as if she has caught a glimpse of the Bridegroom through the slats in a window grate.[2] For another, the voice of nearby children sing-songing an uncommon line – *tolle, lege; tolle, lege! Pick it up and read; Pick it up and read!* – reaches him at the deepest stage of personal crisis. Recognizing the Lord's bidding, as it passed through the voice of anonymous children, Augustine takes up his copy of Paul's letters and receives a special endowment for change as he reads the words before him.[3]

God's manner and timing of speech is full of living variation. But throughout the long history of Christianity, God has never gone completely silent.

Nonetheless, in the last couple centuries many Christians have come to consider hearing God speak as an abnormal, exceptional, or perhaps even impossible event. A few have theologized this negative claim – maybe God lost interest in personal communication after his extensive editorial work on the Bible? "Why mess with perfection? Let people read." A variety of modern theories claim that, in principle, God no longer speaks to people.[4]

I am convinced that God continues to speak to persons. He does so as one person to another, never mechanically. Thus there may also be times where, for his own reasons, God might not speak. Both statements are true.

I would like to explore this highly contested conviction with you. It can be messy. We certainly won't resolve every philosophical or theological worry one might have. The capacity for doubt, after all, is constitutively broader than our capacity to demonstrate *anything* – let alone this particular claim. But we will relate a coherent picture of the experience of personally hearing from God as found in scripture, Christian tradition, and contemporary experience. You will find there are appropriate bases, in thought and experience, for these descriptions.

A few preliminary, big picture observations from scripture are in order:

- Large sections of our Bible are written records of God making specific utterances at specific dates addressing specific occasions. One has only to read the opening the lines of most of the writing prophets to appreciate this.
- Our God speaks and acts – with human beings and in this world! When the writers of scripture refer to 'the Living God' (Mt. 16:16, 22:32, Acts 14:15, Rom. 9:26, 2Cor. 3:3, 6:16, 1 Thess. 1:9, 1 Tim. 3:15, 4:10, Heb. 3:12, 9:14, 10:31, 12:22, 1 Pet. 1:23, Rev. 7:2, 15:7), they are referring specifically to these activities. Idols have mouths but cannot speak, and hands but cannot rescue

[1] See Acts 16:6-10 for Paul's case, or Acts 8:26-40 for Philip's experience. But such directive words, while not every day, are far from unheard of among missionaries up to our own day.
[2] See Song of Songs 2:8-9, and Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* book 3, section 11.
[3] See Augustine's *Confessions* Book 8.12
[4] The term "cessationist" is sometimes used to describe such theologies which claim God's speaking and/or supernatural gifts ceased at a particular stage in Christian history – usually this moment is assigned to the death of the apostles or to the completion of the New Testament canon of writings.

(Is. 44-45, Acts 14:15, 1 Cor. 12:2, 1 Thess. 1:9). In contrast, the Living God both speaks and intervenes in this world to make things happen.

- But Scripture goes further. God's speech is peculiarly effective. Most of what God accomplishes, he does *by speaking*. From the creation of the cosmos (Gen. 1:1ff; Ps. 33:6, etc...) and the call of Abraham's family (Gen. 12:1-3) to the guidance of his people through the prophets and the apostles, God's primary vehicle of agency is speech. He chooses to act by speaking because he dignifies us with choice. He seeks loving obedience, even partnership, not robotic compliance. God's speech enables us to *choose* God's way – not just have it forced upon us.
- God's *way* or *manner* of speaking, at least to the prophets, has changed over time (Heb. 1:1-4). If one excepts Moses as a special case, the earliest form of prophecy in Israel was ecstatic and visionary (1 Sam. 9:9). However, as God's intergenerational educational project progresses[5], God increasingly speaks to people through reasoned, personally integrated thoughts and utterances. God prefers to interact with people in a fully personal way.
- The gold standard for recognizing God's voice is continuity with his full revelation in Jesus, his Son.

Finally, a preliminary word about what hearing God does not do. Hearing God does not put your own thoughts (or even what God said to you) on the same level as the Scriptures.

- The Scriptures or the canon of the New Testament and Old Testament writings are more than just inspired. Of course they're inspired but that's not what's distinctive about them. They've been confirmed by the entire church under guidance of the Holy Spirit as the standard against which we will test our faith and practice for all time and in every place. This is what canon means.
- Inspiration, as evidenced in the Scriptures, often occurred in smaller ways with limited range of authority. It might be that an inspired utterance was for one person alone and for just a particular time. To get a sense of how widespread inspiration was simply read 1 Cor. 12:1-3. Now ask yourself how many utterances in any given Christian assembly would be inspired by this standard.
- So canon is more than inspiration. Keeping this distinction clear in one's mind will liberate you to recognize, in all humility, when God speaks to you today.

Reflection Questions:

- Have you ever heard God speak directly to you?
- Would you like for God to speak to you? Why or why not?
- Have you ever received an insight, as if from beyond, that matches God's character revealed in Jesus? If you are able, please share it.

[5] See *Soul Whisperer* ch. 4 for this understanding of God's project in human history and in Israel.

Session 1

Jesus' Strategy in the Forty Days of Resurrection Appearances

Key Thought: During the forty days between his resurrection and ascension, Jesus methodically introduced his students to a new form of communication that would not require his physical presence. Through staccato physical appearances, interspersed either by non-bodily forms of communication or by speech through personal appearances that they could not yet identify as him, Jesus taught his students how to recognize his words without his bodily presence. They learned to recognize a peculiar increase, within their consciousness, in the density and vitality of meaning as God's way of speaking through the Spirit.

Opening observation:

The Jesus Movement's Self-Description throughout Acts is that they are "Students of the Lord Jesus."

They're not "Graduates" – not "those who once sat at the feet of Jesus." They are real time, present tense students. This is a big, and paradoxical, claim.[6]

- And, yet, throughout Acts, people still claim to be Jesus' students. This self-designation is important because you cannot have a student without a teacher. Student is a relational designation. A student spends time with a teacher in order to become like the teacher. By implication, real interaction with and genuine instruction by Jesus continues. It might change in significant ways over time, but it could not cease altogether.
- In fact, this is exactly what we see happening throughout the book of Acts. Through his Spirit, Jesus continues to speak to and to teach his students as they engage in mission.

A word about where we're headed this weekend. Our primary focus will be on Jesus' teaching strategy and content in the 40 days between his resurrection and ascension.

- Jesus' pedagogical strategy is to teach his students to know when he is speaking to them – to recognize his voice – even when they cannot see his body. We'll talk about how Jesus does that in this session and the next.
- The content of Jesus' teaching – the conversation topic – is always the same: the kingdom of God as it creates world mission. Every single post-resurrection appearance includes a commission. It's what is on Jesus' mind throughout this time. So, after we consider how we can hear Jesus speak, we'll focus on how Jesus shapes us for world mission. That's where we're headed – the arc of our conversation this weekend.

Let's begin with this question: How does Jesus, in this 40-day period, effect a shift to a new way of interacting with his students? That's our focus for this session.

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[6] For three years, Jesus' students walked the roads and mountains paths with Jesus. They shared tables with him in people's home. They discussed scripture and many life-issues in his bodily presence – Jesus was one body among other bodies. To be his student meant to sit at his feet, to walk behind him everywhere he went, to observe his gestures and actions carefully, to memorize what he said… and then to imitate him. All this was done in hopes of understanding him by becoming like him.

So, what could it mean to be his student after Jesus, risen from the dead, ascends into the heavens? How might Jesus teach without being physically present among his students? What would it mean to learn from him under such circumstances?

Before I unpack the crucial biblical texts, I want to gesture toward the *experiential reality* of this mode of interaction. We need to look at actual cases. I'll try to alternate between biblical cases, historical cases, and more contemporary cases. Let's start with Dallas Willard.

Dallas' Dilemma: To Make His Professional Home in the Church or in the University?

A young Dallas Willard was at a dinner with others from his Intervarsity Fellowship Group. The table was set and food was served. But his host, Earl Aldridge, who was also a friend, noticed that Dallas was preoccupied. "Where are you tonight? What's on your mind?"

Dallas confided that he was on the horns of a dilemma. He had been pastoring a small church while also serving as a lecturer at University of Wisconsin Madison – where he had recently finished his Ph.D. in Philosophy. Now he had to choose which to pursue professionally – professor or pastor.

- "I don't know which to choose – I really love both. How do you choose between two things that you love?"
- "That's easy," Earl said. "If you go into the university, the church will remain open to you. If you go into the church, the university will close to you."
- Those words penetrated deeply into Dallas' consciousness and landed with a special weight. In fact, he took them as more than a word from his friend.

About 30 years later, in a very different setting, I heard Dallas simply say, "The Lord told me that if I went into the church, the university would close to me. But that if I went into the university the church would remain open to me." He reported this word from the Lord without any reference to Earl Aldridge, the friend through whose voice that word reached him.[7]

If I may forecast a key understanding of this study – please notice this word from the Lord did not actually tell Dallas what to do. It simply provided a key insight that Dallas needed in order to make a responsible choice. In the handful of occasions where I recall Dallas reporting God speaking to him, I do not know of a direct command – only insights.[8]

In this session: What is going on in these cases?

- Where does it come from? And, is it real?
- To be blunt: Does Christianity throughout the ages disproportionately attract people with a mental disorder? Or, is this simply a feature of the world in which we live? In other words, are these moments of hearing from God an irreducible feature of living on this planet in interaction with the living God?
- My understanding: This is real and, within its appropriate context, it is healthy. Moreover, in the testimony of scripture, we can even trace where it starts (or restarts) among Jesus' people.

Where does this experience begin? It begins in a specific stretch of time – pregnant with divine preparations for a new phase of his work. Jesus taught his students to hear his voice in this way in the forty days between his resurrection and ascension.

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[7] For the backstory, see Gary W. Moon. *Becoming Dallas Willard: The Formation of a Philosopher, Teacher, and Christ Follower.* IVP Books, 2018. p. 91.

[8] I'm not claiming those commands never happen. But I think they are the exceptional cases and not the paradigmatic ones.

- Imagine that after three years with a group of beloved students, you would have only forty more days together. How would *you* use it?
- My personal inclination would be to call an extended retreat. I'd rent out a space, or take everyone camping for forty days. Arrange for 24/7 non-stop interaction – say everything. That's way to do it!
- But Jesus doesn't do that. By all accounts: Jesus' physical presence was staccato, intermittent with his students. He pops in and pops out of their lives. There are maybe six or ten occasions within forty days in which he's with them in a body. Hmm... what's he up to?
- But there's more. Generally speaking, when Jesus does appear to his students he initially appears in a form that they cannot recognize *as Jesus*. After speaking to them in this concealed form, he sometimes makes himself recognizable as the *same body.* But sometimes, with his identity clear through his words and deeds, Jesus does not morph into the appearance they once knew – he maintains the unfamiliar appearance.

Jesus is using a teaching method – he has a strategy. Luke narrates this period as an intentional introduction into a new mode of communication. The staccato appearances are interspersed with non-bodily modes of communication.

- Jesus' goal is to help his students to conclusively and confidently recognize his teaching simply by the experiential quality and content of what they hear, rather than by the familiarity of the bodily face through which the voice comes. In other words, Jesus' word must be discernable separately from his physical countenance. This experience is distinctive of the Jesus movement.[9]
- In many ways, Jesus is inducting his students into a whole new way of inhabiting the world. Under Jesus' tutelage, Jesus' students *learned* to take this world as a theater in which he might communicate to them directly.
- Within this theater, **they learned to recognize a discernable increase in the density and intensity of meaning as God's way of communicating in real time.** I want to offer that phrase as a description of what it is like to hear God speak – one experiences a discernable increase in the density and intensity or vitality of meaning as being an utterance from God.
- In so doing, Jesus is drawing on experiences that were known to, and described by, the prophets of old. Jeremiah is a helpful point of comparison.[10]

Generally speaking, the gospel writers accepted that Jesus, after his ascension, was still interacting with his people in non-bodily ways.[11] Luke, however, provides the clearest account of *the process by which* Jesus

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[9] Although, it is certainly not exclusive to it. The experience in some form goes way back into the deep past of the Lord's interaction with humans in the Garden and was known among the prophets of old.

[10] Jeremiah reflects on a how a true prophet recognized God's voice.

Jeremiah 23:9-22 begins an extended section of distinguishing true and false prophecy. The first aspect of genuine revelation is continuity with God's character. Here false prophets contradict the moral teachings God has already provided – adultery and lies replace proper obedience. They treat repentance as unnecessary.

Jeremiah 23:23-32 points to a difference in the quality and character of God's voice. A fondness for dreams and visionary experiences has misled these false prophets. God's word, on the other hand, is distinctive. The Lord helps us distinguish the difference of his voice (vv.28-29), by guiding questions and a few metaphors. Please consider them, perhaps even take time to meditate on these questions as they illuminate what is distinctive to God's word: "What has straw in common with wheat? Is not my word like fire and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces"?

[11] Consider, for instance, John's account of how the Paraclete would come to dwell in Jesus' students and cause Jesus' words to return to their memory (John 14:16-26). Or, Matthew's closing line wherein Jesus promises to be "with" his students until the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

acclimated his students to these communications and the significance of it transpiring over a *forty day period*. Let's consider Luke's account:

Step One: The Emmaus Road Experience (Luke 24:13-35)

On the day of the resurrection, Cleopas and a travel partner, perhaps his wife, are walking from Jerusalem back to Emmaus. Suddenly, a stranger (so far as their eyes can see) joins them on the road. As he listens in, the stranger asks about their conversation. When they reveal their surprise at his ignorance of current events and their despair at Jesus' failure and death, the stranger responds with a bit of chiding and a scripture lesson. He begins to interpret the scriptures for them, ranging from Moses through the prophets, and shows them that the Messiah must suffer before entering into his glory.

- The whole story turns on the fact that Cleopas and his companion cannot see Jesus' face – a different face and, quite likely, a different tone of voice are uttering Jesus' words. But, later as they break bread, Jesus is suddenly made clearly visible to them – but only for an instant. At that moment, they came to recognize the stranger's words as really being Jesus' words. Revelation of identity follows upon characteristic words and deeds.
- Once Jesus' identity is revealed, they're able to retrospectively recognize clues – telltale signs of Jesus' speech – which were present while the stranger spoke. In Luke 24:32 they say, "were not our hearts burning within us as we were talking with him on the road as he was explaining the scriptures to us."
- Suddenly they've made the connection. The words spoken and the burning heart are not just coincidental – their heart registers the speaker's true identity. The *density and vitality of the insights* supplied along that walk, which once characterized Jesus' manner of teaching when in the flesh, really were Jesus himself teaching. He was teaching them albeit through a different face and with a different texture of voice.
- The insight unleashes energy. Invigorated they run back to Jerusalem… we'll talk about what most immediately transpires there in a subsequent session. It's focused more on the significance of timing and on clarifying Jesus' bodily reality after the resurrection (Luke 24:33-43).

Step Two: Granting Special Insight to the Scriptures

Luke 24:44-49: Jesus "opened their minds to the scriptures" by connecting what is written with what he had done in his life and teaching…

- These inner connections – drawing together the warp and woof of scripture in ways that made the whole picture suddenly come into view – that was characteristic of Jesus' teaching.
- Now Jesus helps his students recognize that it is still Jesus teaching when it transpires without his physical presence.
- It primarily happens as we interact with scripture – suddenly something comes through with intensity and vitality as addressed to me.
- Whether we're sitting alone in our chair with our bible and a cup of coffee, or we're jogging with a friend and talking over some life issue, or we're sitting in church and listening to a formal bible lesson – these moments of penetrating meaning and insight are Jesus still teaching us.
- Jesus' students learn to take this as Jesus' speaking… continuing to teach.
- The specific insights – the content of this mind opening – we'll return to in a subsequent session focused on Jesus' teachings during this period. For the moment, we're just noticing the phenomenon of receiving insight from Jesus and how this constitutes an ongoing form of learning

from Jesus, our Invisible Teacher.

Luke's Summary: The Forty Days and It's Significance (Acts 1:2-3)

In context, Acts 1:1-3 is both an introduction the Luke's second volume and a summary of what was narrated in Luke 24. The texts need to be read in light of each other.

- "The first account I composed, Theophilus, concerning all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach." (Acts 1:1) Luke's gospel is about the *beginning* of Jesus' deeds and teachings. Acts, by implication, is about *the continuation* of Jesus' activity and teaching.[12]
- Luke expands on the transition from the start that Jesus made in his teaching, "until the day when having given orders through the Holy Spirit to his emissaries, whom he had chosen, he was taken up. To these emissaries he presented himself living after his suffering by many proofs, throughout forty days being seen by them and speaking to them the things concerning the kingdom of God." (Acts 1:2-3)
- There is a forty day stretch of sightings and speakings. The speaking moments were, evidently, at least in part "through the Holy Spirit." In context, this could imply a back-and-forth alteration between visible presence and invisible speech through the Holy Spirit. Luke narrated something like it in Luke 24.

The timeframe of forty days is full of significance. Throughout Israel's story, timespans of forty (whether in days, weeks, or years) indicate a crucial period of preparation for some major change. It's the time in which, to ordinary appearances, nothing much is happening but without which what comes next could never happen.[13]

- Moses is in Midian for forty years before God calls him and initiates the Exodus through him. Moses spends forty days on Mount Sinai before descending with the two tablets of Torah. The children of Israel spend forty years in the wilderness before entering the promised land.
- Jesus spends forty days fasting in the wilderness before he's tested and initiates his public ministry.
- Now Jesus interacts with his students, in this staccato manner, over a course of forty days.

Implication? This is preparation for the new normal... a period of gestation within which some importantly new phase of God's project is readied for introduction.

Content and Communication Method:

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[12] "Doing and teaching" is how one would speak of a great teacher. Ezra was considered the great rabbi by many in Jesus' generation. He convened "the great assembly" that the rabbinic movement considered a great turning point in the history of God's dealings with Israel. God's "good hand" was "upon" Ezra because of his character and piety. Ezra's greatness was rooted in his attention or heart-focus: "Ezra had set his heart to seek the Torah, to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ez. 7:10).

[13] The symbolism probably stems from the human gestation period. Human babies grow in a largely concealed way for about 40 weeks from conception to birth. Metaphorically, God's work in human history often "births" new states of affairs after a period of hidden preparation and invisible growth. Of course, several of Jesus' parables highlight this latent and easily overlooked moment in God's actions or kingdom in this world.

We'll come back to this theme later. But briefly notice the fit between this new mode of teaching and the new learning tasks assigned to his students. By preparing his students to recognize his speech without need of his physical presence, even without reference to his specific teachings, Jesus is already preparing them for world mission. We couldn't be both students and those sent to the nations, if we had to be within a 150-foot radius of a physical body to hear him.

Why it matters:

- 1) If this is real, then discipleship is not just a metaphor. It means that you and I can continue to learn from Jesus in the context of our everyday lives. Jesus is still teaching.

- 2) The way of the burning heart *is* the way of world mission.
    - We live in a world that tends to think of hearing from God as an inwardly turned, navel-gazing sort of experience. And we tend to think of changing the world as a frenetic, agitated, all-turned-outward sort of experience.
    - But, for the apprentice of Jesus, it's different. We are taught to take our cues from those words that come with particular depth in the confidence that God is speaking.
    - When we risk acting on these words, Jesus continues to teach and guide and shape this world. Paradoxically, the most effective action for world-changing, long term, proves to be the little deeds rooted in hearing God.

Session 2

How the Resurrected One Convinces: The Pattern of Break-Through Communications

Key Thought: Jesus uses a consistent strategy when the word he must speak is so unexpected that his students would ordinarily doubt its reality. He will speak independently to two different people, or groups, and then cause their paths to cross. I call this a triangulation. This is added to the characteristic match up, with uncanny timing, of internal words and external events. I call this feature synchronicity. When added to the primary criteria of consistency with God's previous revelation in Scripture, these provide sufficient means for assessing those moments when we are struck by a peculiar density and vitality of meaning.

Thus far we have established a few solid points about hearing God.

- The 'Living God' speaks – typically, through our own thoughts or through the words of another person.
- Words from God possess a distinctive weightiness or density. Much meaning squeezes into a sentence or two, which may be staggering in their implications.
- The character of Jesus – at once full of truth and goodwill – stamps the God-given utterance.
- In keeping with what is revealed in scripture, God's voice today will always draw out or concretize the specific implications of Jesus being Lord (I Cor. 12:1-3).

Question: Can you remember a time when you could not quite believe your own eyes or ears? What do you do when you aren't sure if you really saw or heard something?

The people in scripture had all the same difficulties that we do in discerning whether a word was from God or not. Likewise, they too had to interpret God's intentions. This is nothing new.

In this session, we will talk about how God guides not only persons but also communities in real time. In other words, we want to know how our Lord provides mid-course corrections and directs us to specific tasks that we couldn't figure out on our own. God doesn't mumble. When God wants us to do something very specific, we can be assured he is fully capable of intervening intelligibly.[14]

Break-Through Communication: Synchronous Triangulations

In scripture God has a telltale manner of directing people in matters that require special intervention. God often confirms his words within a community.

Two essential characteristics of God's guiding are synchronicity and triangulation (or convergence). Both are amply illustrated throughout Luke's account of the expansion of the early church in Acts.

[14] One essential qualification, to which we'll return in our last session: Listening to God is *not* primarily about being told what to do. Nor does God desire for our actions to only arise in response to specific instructions or commands from him. God delights to see us act freely based upon what we see, through apprenticeship in the Kingdom, to be right, good and in keeping with God's project.

- By synchronicity I mean the uncanny timing of internal words in relation to external events. This was recognized as a mark of YHWH's word among the prophets as well. Consider Jeremiah 32:6-9 and the role of timing in Jeremiah's capacity to know YHWH's voice.
- By triangulation I refer to spatially and personally distinct actions of God that, independent of human coordination, converge to indicate a new activity or revelation.

Can you discern the repetition of a basic pattern in the following stories?

- Let's begin by revisiting Luke 24, this time focused on the timing of events and the number of persons involved. Lk. 24:13-53 = On the day of the resurrection, two disciples are travelling from Jerusalem back to Emmaus. Jesus joins them incognito and strikes up a conversation. He explains the scriptures to them and, when evening comes, he blesses and breaks bread. Suddenly their 'eyes are opened', they recognize Jesus. In that instance, he vanishes. The two rise and return to Jerusalem to tell the apostles (24:33). When these two walk through the door, they find the apostles discussing an independent appearance, 'The Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon' (24:34). While they are discussing the uncanny appearances, Jesus again appears in the midst of the group and gives them instructions (24:36ff).
- Acts 9:1-19 = Saul of Tarsus rides *enroute* to Damascus to imprison those who call upon Jesus' name. On the way, the Lord appears to him. Saul is blinded by the experience and must be led by hand into Damascus (Acts 9:1-9). After three days, the Lord appears to Ananias and tells him to go speak to Saul (Acts 9:10-11). Ananias doesn't want to go. The Lord tells him that Saul has received a vision of a man named Ananias coming to restore his sight (Acts 9:12) and tells Ananias the Lord's commission for Saul (Acts 9:15-16). The message Ananias is to report (Acts 9:15-16) matches the commission Saul personally received on the Damascus Road (Acts 26:16-18). So when Ananias comes to Saul, there is an uncanny convergence of words independently told to both parties.
- Acts 10:1-48 = Cornelius receives a vision instructing him to send for a man named Peter who is staying with Simon the Tanner in a house by the sea. He dispatches men to do so. Meanwhile, Peter is asleep on the roof and dreams three times of a blanket let down from heaven full of unclean animals. Three times he is told to kill and eat, three times he objects, and three times he is told, 'What God has cleansed, do not consider common.' As he mulls over the vision, Cornelius' messengers arrive. The Spirit tells him to go with them, to the home of a Gentile, without misgivings. Upon arrival, Peter hears Cornelius' side of the story and preaches the gospel to him. While he preaches, the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-46). Peter concludes that God has chosen to include the Gentiles too. Later, when Peter is pressed to explain his reasons, the church in Jerusalem also recognizes the synchronicity between external events and Peter's internal thoughts as a mark of God's revelation (Acts 11:1-18).
- Acts 16:6-10 = Paul and his team are on mission. They want to preach in Asia, but they 'have been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia' (Acts 16:6). They try to loop northeast to Bithynia and again the Spirit says, 'No'. In a vision at night, Paul sees a man of Macedonia asking for help (Acts 16:9). 'And when *he* had seen the vision, immediately *we*... concluded that God had called *us* to preach the gospel to them [in Macedonia]' (Acts 16:10).

In each case, 1) God initiates the interactions. 2) God speaks or acts through multiple parties independently. 3) A moment of convergence between the independent words and acts clearly reveals a new direction is intended. 4) The convergence is communally recognized. 5) Fundamental shifts in belief or way of life result.

So, to summarize our findings. Two features standout as the pattern of break-through communication from God.

- Triangulations: Jesus uses a consistent strategy when the word he must speak is so unexpected that his students would ordinarily doubt its reality. He speaks independently to two different people, or groups, and then causes their paths to cross. This is triangulation.

- Synchronicity: the reception of God's word is characterized by a match up, with uncanny timing, of an internal word or thought and some external event(s). This is synchronicity. It's an old feature of prophetic experience. Jeremiah provides a window into his experience (Jeremiah *32:6-15, esp. 8 'Then I* knew *that this was the word of the LORD.').* The LORD then provides retrospective understanding (32:16-44).

Questions for Discussion or for Reflection:

- Have you ever experienced this sort of convergence in your life? What happened and how did it change things?
- Within these scenarios, how important is it for individuals to recognize the Spirit's voice? Could the communal discernment proceed if the individuals involved were either unmindful of God's voice or afraid to share it with others?
- What, if anything, keeps you from sharing a word from God within your community? What would it take for you to risk doing so?

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Session 3

Jesus' Students as Teachers of the Nations

Key Thought: Who is capable of teaching the nations and resolving the most perplexing, intractable issues in human life? Jesus' answer: "My students. Moreover, they will do it simply *as students* (not as experts or specialists) by bearing witness to what they're learning from me." Teachers are authorized by knowledge, not by mere opinion or belief. So what knowledge is Jesus imparting to his students, which makes this role credible? Jesus imparts, through his students, the knowledge most essential to human life: how to unite humanity in love. That is the substance of the knowledge we deliver. How do we deliver it? His students, simply as witnesses to this life of learning from Jesus, offer people (individuals and culture groups) the opportunity for "rethinking that leads to a release from error."

Same Events, New Focus

We are shifting now to the *content* of Jesus' teaching over these 40 days. It's still teaching about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3) – about what God is doing and how we're invited to join in. But, Jesus' teaching of the kingdom is now being expanded to help his students see that God's project is so vast that there is a role in it for literally *every person* in *every nation*.

In the present phase of God's project, those who are learning life from Jesus are going to be called to play a role in helping the nations understand what God is doing – helping them understand the kingdom.

The Meaning of Pentecost: God's Instruction Written on Human Hearts

It's worthwhile to begin with the end of this remarkable period. Forty days are a period of preparation for something. The inauguration of the next phase happens at day fifty – Pentecost. The timing is not accidental. It's cram packed with significance. Anyone in Israel of Jesus' day would be able to understand, if they were willing to pause and reflect.

Pentecost – the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot) – occurs fifty days after the Passover. Pentecost just means "fifty." Pentecost commemorated the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. Just as Passover was a celebration of God liberating Israel from slavery by leading them out of Egypt, so Pentecost was a celebration of God extracting Egyptian slavishness from his people by giving them the Torah. Fifty days after the Exodus, Israel is gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai and they receive the LORD's instructions there.

In Jesus' day, there was a standard way of narrating the event we find in Ex. 20 and retold in Deut. 5. We have three Targums which are substantially the same in how they expand on this bestowal of the Torah. Here's a sample of how that story was told:

- "And the Lord spoke all these words, saying: The first word, when it was coming out from the mouth of the Holy One, may His name be blessed, was like sparks, and like lightning, and like fiery flames; a lamp of fire on its right and a lamp of fire on its left, flying and soaring into the air of the heavens and returning and appearing over the armies of Israel. It came back and was engraved on the tablets of the covenant that were put into the palm of Moses' hands while turning itself around in them from one side to the other. And then He cried out and said, "My people, children of Israel, I am the Lord your God who redeemed you and brought you out redeemed from the land of the Egyptians, out of the house of slave bondage." The second word, when it was coming out from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be His name, was like sparks and lightning and fiery flames; a lamp of fire was on its right and a lamp of fire was on its left, flying and soaring in the air of the heavens, returning and appearing over the armies of Israel. It came back and was engraved on the tablets of the covenant, and was turning over on them from side to side.

> And then He was crying out and saying, "My people, the house of Israel, you shall not make for yourself an image, or form, or any likeness that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the waters below the earth." (Targum Ps. Jonathan Exodus 20:1-4 TARG3-E)

- Quote Midrash on Ps. ... about God's word dividing into seventy languages of the world and flying throughout the world to each nation.

Now you will remember Jesus' promise. At the Last Supper, he interprets his crucifixion as what will initiate the new covenant. The new covenant promise, through Jeremiah, was that the Torah – God's instructions – would be written not on stone tablets but upon the human heart or mind.[15] Everyone, from the bottom to the pinnacle of society, would know the LORD and be released from their errors. This is a new day.

The imagery of Pentecost, as we see it in Acts 2, would have been easily understandable.

- The fire of God's word circles the air but this time it rests on human beings. It will occupy not stone but flesh, not external objects but the inner world of transformed human beings.
- Those who receive God's word into themselves glow visibly, just like Moses did when he finally descends the mountain with the Torah in a form that successfully enters into the human social world.
- Those human beings, who are now inhabited by the Holy Spirit and have God's instructions emanating from within themselves, speak in languages corresponding to all the nations of the world.

What's happening? The Torah is given anew. God's instructions are internalized. The words of fire inhabit human lives. The way of the burning heart is not just a single moment on the road to Emmaus. The way of the burning heart is the new normal. Electric insights, which allow a person to live today in step with Jesus and the Father's project, are an inexhaustible resource for this new community full of renewed people.

And, because God's instructions, through the person of the Holy Spirit, now indwells the people of this community, the nations can learn a new way. The nations are now able to hear knowledge – to receive instruction from God that can resolve the dire predicaments of human life. God has nudged his community toward that point of development in which the nations might come seeking instruction and might learn how to live without war.

Jesus' Various Commissions to World Mission

Since we know the culmination of the new covenant condition is about to arrive, let's go back through some of Jesus' conversations during this forty day preparation period and notice their focus. Just about every time Jesus appears, he commissions someone to engage in world mission.

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[15] "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31:31–34)

The most famous commission, often called the "Great Commission" is found in Matt. 28:16-20. Let's take a look.

> "The eleven students went to Galilee to the mountain which Jesus charged them. And when they saw him, they worshiped but some hesitated. And approaching them, Jesus spoke to them saying, 'To me has been given all authority in heaven and upon earth. Therefore go and instruct all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep in practice all that I commanded you. And behold, I am with you every single day until the culmination of the age.'"

Students – Or, Who does Jesus Send?

Notice, in 28:16, the term used for those who are being sent on mission. They are simply "students" – the eleven students. These are ordinary students who are being entrusted with the role of becoming teachers of the nations.

- They're not: Missionaries. Pastors. Specialists, Experts, or Technicians…
- They're just ordinary people who are learning life from Jesus and whom Jesus will use to enroll others in his school.

Sounds a tad preposterous doesn't it? A handful of fishermen. Some small business owner-operators. A tax farmer. An alt-right political activist. They're basically intelligent but they not an especially impressive bunch of people. But Jesus says, "You're it. You are the ones who will go out to teach the nations."

People Groups – Or, To Whom are Jesus' Students Sent?

By the way, as a translation, the word "nations" can mislead us. It's a standard translation, but we tend to think of nation-*states* when we hear it. There is no sense of "state" or "government" in the word. In biblical terms, a nation is a people group – a distinct, mutually self-identifying cultural grouping. They tend to share a language, a story of identity, and some sort of religious or worship practices. So, for instance, the Kurds and the Gypsies and many native American peoples are "nations." They have no state or government of their own. But they are nations or distinct people groups, in the biblical sense.

- Now, because they have been learning from Jesus, these ordinary students are going to be enabled to address those issues that are fundamental for human existence. For the same reason and in the same respect, we'll also be empowered.

"All that I Commanded You" – Or, What is the Knowledge Base for Guiding the Nations?

As teachers of the nations, this is the perennial question we must be ready to address: Who or what will provide the knowledge that humans need in order to live well together?

- This is a question to which humanity has been seeking an answer for thousands of years now.
- Who can teach the nations and resolve the most perplexing, intractable issues in human life? Jesus' answer: "My students can. And not the especially bright ones, necessarily, but my ordinary students who are listening to me and learning from me. They will be able to address the most vexing issues of human life – in the spheres in which they live and work with me."

Let's add some specificity: Teachers possess authority based on knowledge – not opinion or belief or strong vocal preferences. Only knowledge gives authority. So, if it is *as students of Jesus* that we are called upon to be teachers of the nations, *there must be some knowledge base* that we've been imparted. What is it? When we answer that question, we'll understand something important about our calling.

Only Jesus' teachings on co-working with God and moral transformation (a.k.a. "his kingdom and righteous") is capable of resolving the issues that human beings face in their natural clumps, which we call "nations" or people groups.

As a microcosm of the general issue, I'll reflect on a walk through a refugee camp.

- People from all over the Middle East are here. They've fled their own countries – often because others who shared their own language and religion wanted to kill them. Why? Others were there simply because they thought it might open a door to economic advancement in the West. But it's a pretty desperate move for finding a better paying job. Why risk it?
- So now they're in Greece. But the hatred and the moral confusion comes with them. The NGOs cannot put them in the same camp in Greece, because they'll knife each other. Beatings and rape are routinely used to shame and put people in their place.
- But the problems are not just Middle Eastern. One might ponder all the billions of euros that were redirected toward these people from the EU. Somehow only a trickle of it actually makes it to the people. Because whoever is in charge of stewarding the cash, just cannot imagine doing so self-sacrificially or even just without graft. NGOs and government officials, high-level management and low-level workers all pad their pockets with the funds rather than making sure it all makes it to the refugees.
- Unsurprisingly, the camp management and the refugees often find themselves in adversarial relations with each other.

Those who have learned deeply and are practicing Jesus' teaching *know* some things – have a deep experiential basis for guaranteeing the truth of some things that others don't yet know.

For instance, consider the people, whether back in Syria or Iran or now living in a camp in Greece, who beat, rape, and kill in order to put their world in order. Do you think those who perpetrate such acts *know* the following?

- Do they know that God is at work in this world and that not only is it possible to seek first his project but that if one does it, God will reliably provide all the resources you need? I guarantee they do not know it.
- Do you think they know that is more blessed to give than to receive? That life-satisfaction increases with generosity but not with accumulation?
- Or, do you think they know that Jesus has say over all things? – that he is competently in charge of every area of human life, that you can call upon him to work with you, in whatever field you are in, and he is capable of guiding you into truth? Do you think they know that? No.
- Do they know that it is possible, and even advantageous, to live without anger and contempt toward other people, without nursing overblown yearnings and twisted desires, and to simply let go of all verbal manipulation and deceit? Are they aware of this as a real life-possibility? They don't know this.

- Do you think they know that trying to secure one's own life leads to destroying it, but that, paradoxically, if you give up your life for Jesus and the gospel – that you will receive it back with new fullness and joy and strength?
- Do you think they know that under God's eternal care it is even safe to love one's enemies? – to seek the good of people that would hurt you? (Not their aims, but their personal *good*.) That's something the world doesn't yet know.

Do you think it might make a difference if people knew these things? Historically, it has made a huge difference at all levels of society.

This is knowledge. Only Jesus' apprentices are in a position – having received this, having tried it, having found it actually changes life for the better – only Jesus' apprentices are in a position to enlighten the nations with this knowledge.

Baptism: Ritual Transfer of Ownership to the Trinity

Those who are enrolled as Jesus' students from the nations, are immersed into the name of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Commission in Luke: Insight from the Scriptures into both Jesus' Life and Ours!

Let's consider another commission Jesus gave during his appearances: Luke 24:44ff

- "And he said to them, 'These are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you – that all the things written about me in the Torah of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their mind to understand the Scriptures. And he said to them, 'Thus it is written the Christ must suffer and be raised from the dead on the third day, and rethinking resulting in release from errors must be announced in his name to all the nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And, behold, I am sending the promise of the Father upon you. You, however, sit tight in the city until you're clothed with power from on high.'" (Luke 24:44-49)

We've already spoken of the "opening of minds to grasp the inner connections between the Scriptures" and the density and vitality of meaning which characterize those insights. Hold on to that. We want to build on it with some specific understandings which were delivered in that fashion.

"The Law the Prophets and the Psalms" don't only predict *Messiah's* suffering and resurrection. They do that. But they also predict *our mission* to all nations in his name.

- Stop and ponder the significance of such a statement. It means the prophets don't only foretell Jesus' life – they foretell Elisabeth's life, and Mohsen and Saye's, and Julie's and Vaggelis', and Terry's and Becky's, and the rest of ours. They foretell your life and mine – at least in so far as we have this role in carrying the gospel to all nations.
- As you walk through that door to speak with your neighbor, as you broach the topic to witness to your friend, it may seem like a spur of the moment choice on your part. It may be something that you hadn't planned out. But God has been thinking about this for a very long time. He's been making arrangements.

- Hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, through the prophets, God spoke of a time to come when the nations would convert – turn from futile ways to worship the one true and living God. Here's what you need to know. God was thinking of *you,* when he promised it. He had each of your contributions in mind when he predicted that day – a day when he'd not only be a light to Israel but a light to the nations... A day when gradually people would come to trust in the Lord enough for swords to be beaten into plow shears and for wars to cease...
- At least one element in God's mind was something like this. Amidst a grievous invasion of Ukraine, God would stirred up the spirit of a guy in Dallas – a surgeon by the name of Steve. As the injustice and horrors of that war agitated him, it would just so happen that Steve would be asked to teach on Matthew 24. Jesus' warnings about love growing cold as lawlessness increased would enter Steve's mind with a particular density and vitality – they would be words spoken *to him*. An idea would form in his mind, which to many just sounded insane, to visit Ukraine and freely offer his services in Jesus' name as an expression of God's own love. He risked acting on this thought and traveled to Lviv. "Chance meetings" followed that opened doors – doors with no handle on the outside. As Steve walked up to the main children's hospital in Lviv, one of their surgeons was walking out to meet a patient. In their first interaction, she was so touched by Steve's offer and the surgical supplies he'd brought that she facilitated his introduction to her colleagues. Over the course of many trips, other colleagues have joined in and this work shines out in Ukraine as a sign of God's love and support through a very dark season. God had this work and many thousands of other works in his mind from time unknown.
- And it doesn't have to be anything so dramatic. What God has in mind is the sort of thing that happens when you sit down over a cup of coffee with your co-worker or neighbor and share what you are learning from Jesus.

This means that your life and *the details of your life are not a surprise to the Lord*. He's been preparing for it. You can count on his provisions being ready and in place when they are needed.

- The difficulties you will face as well as the financial and human resources you will need – God is aware of them and has made arrangements for you long before you arrived on the spot.
- That conversation may be something last minute for you. It's not so for God. You can exhale in this knowledge and confidently walk forward a step at a time.

We also learn that Jesus sends us to be a specific type of person – his "witnesses." Ultimately, Jesus is the teacher of the nations. We facilitate that by being witnesses to Jesus as teacher and Lord.

- All we need to be is a witness. Here's the deal with being a witness. All you have to tell is what you know. That is all you are responsible for. Different people will know different things to varying degrees. That's all fine. It is even according to God's best strategy for redeeming the world. Whenever you are asked a question, you simply respond truthfully.
- So, a really good answer for a witness on certain occasions would be "I have no idea." I still encounter questions where that's the best answer I can give at the moment.
- You don't have to know everything – you *can't know everything*. All you need to do is share what you do know.
- God oversees putting us with the right people for each occasion. It's possible, with any particular person, not only to have too little information but also to have too much information to be helpful. A great deal depends on the person and the circumstance.

"Behold I am sending the promise of the Father upon you..." (24:49). Here's the beautiful thing. As we go about sharing what we know with those who ask, we are not the only one at work there. The presence of the Spirit is at work.

- You have no idea how powerfully God can use that little word of what you know and your example as you follow Jesus. He takes such little things and remakes people's lives.
- Example: Dinner for the Tom and Bea
- Don't underestimate what God can do in such little things. With this, he sends us out to the nations.

What's our core message? "Repentance in his name for the forgiveness of sins." (24:47)

Repentance simply means to think again – to rethink something. The word was much used not only by the Hebrew prophets but also among the Greek and Roman philosophers. They were the people who would say, "Really? You did that?! How's that working for you now? Maybe we should pull back a few steps and think about why you did that? Do you want to rethink anything?"

- As we go out to the nations, we are inviting them to rethink things. What things? In the light of Jesus, rethink everything!
- Start with reconsidering *what's possible*. Now that we know God is working and even raises the dead – there's a lot possible that we never would have imagined beforehand. Broaden your horizon. Think again.
- *What's worthwhile* and what's a waste of time? There's plenty to revisit there. If God's working right where we're at and death isn't the end, many of our initial assumptions on this topic are probably misguided. So, I can think again about some of the stuff that I always thought was worth chasing – money, position, prestige. It's useful to have some cash every once in a while. It's certainly needed for some things. But is that really what I'm going to *live* for? Mull it over. Think again.
    - One of the best things that can happen in a human life is, every once in a while, to stop and think again. That's what this word, "repent," is about. It's one of the *best* words out there. It's not just a preachy, hellfire and brimstone word. It bespeaks new possibilities for life in rethinking, recalibrating. We've been given it *as a gift* in Jesus' name. And we pass on this *gift* in Jesus' name.
    - We do it on the basis of his authority. His character and authority – "name" – gives us a way of stopping and recalibrating. We can look again and choose differently.

This leads to "forgiveness of sins" or, to translate it quite literally and less churchly, "Release from Errors."

- Sin is what happens when you aim at something and miss it. It's a mistake, an error, a screw up. "Strike!"
- The word that is translated "forgiveness" is the word "to release or untie."
    - In secular Greek, the moment at the beginning of a chariot race when the barrier drops out of the way and the horses can charge forward to begin – you know what that's called? Forgiveness. It's the same word. Release. Unleashing.
    - Go. You're free. Unbound.
    - That's what we're offered. Release from errors.

In Jesus' name – under his character and authority – we are empowered to rethink life and rethinking in this manner results in a release from our errors. There's no better news for human life.

- Anybody who has thought much about the state that the world is in, eventually comes down to two possibilities: either the world is messed up, fundamentally flawed, or I am.
    - And any intelligent person would hope that it's the second.
    - Because if what's fundamentally wrong is the system or "it's just the way things are" or reality is inherently tragic – then we're all screwed. Because there's nothing we can do about things so large and all encompassing. It's too big for any of us.
    - But if in some important sense *I'm the problem*, there's hope. Because that can change. I can obediently do something a little different today than I did yesterday.
- So forgiveness of sins – release from errors – is not "Jesus will let you get away with it."
    - Yes, he releases you from past guilt too. But that's not everything he's talking about here.
    - It's not only that the past is cleared, it's that the gates have also been flung open and you can live forward – beyond the errors that have plagued and wrecked life up to this point.
- Rethinking and release from errors is not a onetime event. It's the basis for a entire life – individually but also for whole people groups.

Let's pause to connect a dot here. As witnesses, we only share what we know. So what do I know about how rethinking life, in light of Jesus' name, releases from error? Well, I can tell a very specific story about that. I know how that has happened, to some imperfect but significant degree, in my own life. You will have a bit different story to tell and that's wonderful.

- My own repentance is my primary resource, humanly speaking, as I witness.
- So we go to the nations as witnesses... We have the opportunity to rethink, and with it the possibility of release from errors – and a whole life – a divergent path that leads the nations of the world closer to heaven than to hell.

That's why, after his resurrection, Jesus sends ordinary people like you and me out to begin the process of making other disciples to Jesus... of turning cultures and nations to his way.

- It's not by seizing control of a state, not by military might, or leveraging political power that this happens. None of that is essential to what Jesus enlists us to do. Rather, "go out and make students" bring them to the point where they are ready to be immersed in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – in other words help them become ready to give ownership of their bodies over to this Triune God. Show them how to keep all the things that I taught you.
- So, you teach Jesus' way the same way as you teach anything else. Consider how you teach your teenage son or daughter to drive a car. How do you do it? You let them watch you. You tell them what you are doing – call some attention to it. Explain it a little. Then you invite them to try, and you hang on for your life as he skids around... But, gradually, as you offer pointers and troubleshoot his difficulties, he learns to drive and can do it without you. That's how we invite people into doing the things that we've done from the understandings we've received.
- It's the same way with Jesus sending his students out to the nations. Cultures will be turned, and life will be transformed, in so far as we take Jesus' way of life – his teaching – and simply make it available to those around us.
- This is how Jesus goes about resolving the most crucial elements of human life – teaching us how we can live together across boundaries and differences, how we can love even when others hate, how we can seek the good of another even when that other is choosing to seek our harm. It's that life, that knowledge, which alone can transform this world. It can redeem a world that is terribly broken.

Session 4

How the Resurrected One Provides for His Community
John 20:30-21:14

Key Thought: Jesus' appearance to his disciples beside Galilee is a sign – it is an actual event that also gestures beyond itself to some further reality or truth. In this case, the event gestures toward a pattern by which the Resurrected One provides for community. Here's the sevenfold pattern: 1. The normal things stop working. 2. Jesus appears incognito and calls attention to the new ineffectiveness. 3. Still unrecognized, Jesus calls his people to a small act of obedience which produces an unmanageable or chaotic fruitfulness. 4. In the midst of the turmoil, one person in the community draws near to Jesus. 5. Jesus demonstrates his provision – he already has what is needed for the community. 6. Jesus empowers a particular individual or group to do something that the rest of the community, even together, cannot do. 7. Everyone comes to the table and Jesus is known to be among his people.

In this session, we will focus on Jesus' appearance to seven disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee or Tiberias. But to read it well, we need to notice the sentences immediately preceding.

John tells us how to read this book. It's a book of *signs.*

- "Many other signs Jesus performed in the presence of his students, which are not written in this book. But these (signs) are written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and so that by believing you might have life in his name." (20:30-31)
- How do signs work? They direct our minds beyond themselves to whatever they signify. A pointing finger is perhaps the most elemental and universal sign. When someone points his finger, we are not going to understand it by fixating on the finger itself. Instead, we glance from the finger to what it is gesturing toward. A bit more conventional example would be the "do not enter" sign. The big red sign with a horizontal white line through it is intended to direct your mind to the idea of oncoming traffic and to dissuade you from turning the wrong way onto a one-way street.
- John's book not only tells us what Jesus did. John records things that Jesus did which *also point toward something else*. Jesus' deeds reveal truths that we're meant to grasp as we read. So we're intended to notice what Jesus does and then ask a question: What does that deed tell us about life in this world with God?

The present story – Jesus' appearance to seven disciples on the shore of Galilee – depicts how the Resurrected One provides for his community. The elements of this event, which transpired one morning in the Galilee, contain in seed-form the pattern of something that will happen *over and over again* in Jesus' community throughout history. Without knowing the story of your community, I'd wager that this pattern has played out here as well.

Let's look at these elements one by one in sequence and see what we can learn from them:

1. Business as usual stops working. Members of Jesus' community engage in activities that they have successfully negotiated time and again. They are within their zone of competency, but their usual has stopped working. Something has shifted but it's not clear what.

   "After these things, Jesus manifested himself again to the students by the Sea of Tiberias. This is how he showed up. Simon Peter along with Thomas, who is called the Twin, and Nathaniel from Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee and two other of his students were together. Simon Peter says to them, 'I'm going fishing.' They say to him, 'Then we're coming with you.' They

went out and climbed into the boat. And that night they caught *nothing*." (John 21:1-3)

This group of Jesus' students are fishermen. They know their work – this is a sphere of long acquired competence. Once they were good enough at it to have multiple boats and workers under them. But suddenly their efforts are fruitless. They catch not a meager load but nothing at all.

Periodically, within the life of Jesus' community, something shifts. What once worked ceases to bear fruit. We've become accustomed to the world responding to our efforts in a certain way but the world has changed. Our efforts feel futile. Faithfulness hasn't changed. It's just not working the way it used to.

My own ministry, and the communities I've served, have passed through a few of these moments over the decades. Most recently we were engaged, for about half a decade, in a thriving mission to apprentice Muslim background believers in Greece. A few years ago, the flow of refugees suddenly shifted and the people we'd been developing dwindled to very few in Greece. Simultaneously, a handful of the Muslim converts that we'd deeply invested in proved untrustworthy – a few in trivial ways and one in a deeply hurtful and treacherous manner. What we had been doing faithfully was no longer working in the same way.

2. Jesus enters the scene unrecognized and gently calls attention to the ineffectiveness.

   "When morning had already come, Jesus stood on the beach, *but the students did not know it was Jesus*. Therefore, Jesus says to them, 'Children, you don't have any fish do you?' They answered him, 'No.'" (21:4-5)

   It's characteristic of Jesus' resurrection appearances that his disciples are not able to immediately recognize him – sight is not the primary form of identification. Jesus' mighty deeds and words[16] (or doings and teachings) shine through an unfamiliar body and face. Jesus speaks and interacts before ever manifesting himself in the familiar form with which they once walked and dined.

   At this stage in the community's crisis, Jesus simply appears as the one who will say out loud what everyone might see who was inclined to see. "How's that working for you? Something's changed, hasn't it?"

   "Children, you don't have any fish do you?"

3. Jesus, still unrecognized, calls for a small act of obedience. When obeyed, the results prove so unprecedented and immense that the community simply cannot manage them. In the midst of this unmanageable fruitfulness, Jesus at last is recognized by someone in the community.

   "So he said to them, 'Toss your net on the right side of the boat and you'll make a discovery.' So, they tossed [it there] and then they were not strong enough to pull it in because of the great number of fish. So, that student whom Jesus loved says to Peter, 'It's the Lord!'" (21:6-7a)

   This element of the event rhymes with – repeats distinctive features of – an earlier event. Jesus, as

[16] see Lk. 24:19; Act 1:1; and background understanding of a teacher's heart focus in Ez. 7:10

he has done before, calls on his people to obey him, within a zone of their own competence, in a manner that doesn't make sense to them. The first time Jesus did this (see Lk. 5:4-11), Peter protested a bit but then obeyed simply out of respect for Jesus. Peter didn't think it would work, but he did it anyway. Then too the result was unmanageable and Jesus was, to a significant degree, made known to them.

Within the stagnant, befuddling ineffectiveness of this moment in the community, Jesus will in some manner call for our obedience. It may seem like a pointless change – cast right instead of left – and it may offend our sense of competence. But when we respond attentively and act, nonetheless, in keeping with this call, suddenly barrenness gives way to rush of abundant fruitfulness that becomes its own problem. The problem of failure gives way to the new problem of unmanageable effectiveness. After all, Jesus did promise that each day would have enough trouble of its own (Mt. 6:34). That includes the day of shocking success.

We're currently experiencing this sort of shocking, unanticipated success. After the departure of the bulk of the refugees, Jesus gave us an invitation – an opportunity to import a 30,000 volume graduate level theological library. It didn't make sense to most within our community. We acted, nonetheless, on that call and it has become unmanageably fruitful. I cannot, in all honesty, claim to understand everything that is happening. Jesus is doing something beyond us. Our obedience opened the door.

But this unmanageable fruitfulness is nothing new to the Jesus movement. Consider, for instance, what follows in the book of Acts. The church's faithfulness in caring for the orphan and widow, amidst prodigious overall and cross-cultural growth, led to an incapacity to keep up. Some widows among the Greek-speaking members of the church were being overlooked in the day to day service. There were too many people to keep track of. Complaints bubble up. Simple obedience to Jesus' call has put the community in state where the resulting blessings are corporately unmanageable.

The really important thing happens next...

4. There's a bit of chaos when a community is thrust into a season of shocking fruitfulness. But, in the midst of this God-touched turmoil, one of those who has recognized Jesus, veers away from the management struggle and directly seeks the Lord. He or she draws near to Jesus as the others, for the moment, struggle to manage the results.

   "Therefore Simon Peter, when he heard that it was the Lord, wrapped his outer garment about him (because was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea. But the other students came in the boat, since they were not far – only 100 yards – from the land, dragging the net of fish." (21:7b-8)

   Peter is as impulsive as ever. When he knows Jesus is on the shore, he immediately takes the most direct route to reach him. As soon as he has made minimal preparation for decency (an outer garment), he throws himself into the sea. The general community is kind of desperate for a way to deal with the load of fish, but Peter is desperate to talk to Jesus.[17]

[17] As an aside: This isn't the first time Peter sees Jesus after the resurrection. We're told by both Luke (24:34) and Paul (1 Cor. 15:5) that Peter was the first apostle to whom Jesus appeared to after his resurrection. We're told that it happened but

I don't know what Peter wanted to say or do with Jesus. Peter may not have known. He's that sort of guy. But as Peter draws near to Jesus, Jesus doesn't forget the community as he receives Peter. What seems self-indulgent amid the crisis of the moment, is going to be used for the good of the community as a whole.

Again, this pattern repeats itself as we read through the church's story. Following the complaint from the Greek speaking members of the Jerusalem church, the apostles seek the Lord and hand off the food-ministry to seven Greek speaking members who become the first "deacons" or servants of the church in Jerusalem. (Acts 6:2-3)

5. At this point, Jesus demonstrates that he already possesses the resources necessary for the community.

   "So once they got out on the land, they see a charcoal fire laid and fish laid upon it along with bread." (John 21:9)

   In the very middle of the overwhelming situation that suddenly overtakes the obedient community, Jesus already has everything they need. Breakfast is ready.

   It's is a general truth. Even in the midst of the most pressurized and unexpected circumstances, Jesus has access to all the resources needed by his community. We can trust that even before we see it.

6. At this point Jesus empowers someone to act on his behalf with a strength not his or her own. Jesus often calls a particular person, or perhaps a particular set of people, to do what all the others combined simply could not do. There's a handoff of duties that follows upon specific gifting.

   "Jesus says to them, 'Bring some of the fish ya'll caught now!' So, Simon Peter went up and pulled onto the land the net full of 153 large fish – yet although there were so many, the net was not torn!" (21:10-11)

   The other six disciples couldn't manage to pull this net full of fish into the boat or onto land. They had just dragged it along as best they could.

   Now, at Jesus' bidding, Peter simply walks over, picks the whole thing up and carries it onto the land! I don't know how much each fish weighs. Even if the "big fish" were only about one kilo (2.2 lbs) each – just to think minimally – hoisting 153 kilos in a wiggling, awkward bundle is a very prodigious lift. It's striking both that one person could lift it and that the net, under such pressure, would hold without tearing.

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we have no story of what specifically was said or done. Peter's last glimpse of Jesus, across a charcoal fire in the high priest's courtyard, had been as he disowned and denied knowing Jesus. So, Jesus' first appearance to Peter was certainly full of forgiveness and reconciliation. But the details were just too intimate to narrate – even for Peter. It's not for us to know what was said. It's enough for us to know that it happened – that the first student Jesus seeks out after rising from the dead is the one who most recently and egregiously disowned him. "If you are laying your offering on the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering before the altar. Go. First be reconciled to your brother!..." Jesus lived his own teaching.

There are immense centrifugal forces created in a community during times of sudden growth. Jesus' empowerment and call of particular people enables them to hold things together and to carry loads that even a significant number of others simply could not manage. God supplies strength, in particular seasons and for particular tasks, to specific people. The gifts of the Spirit are real. Jesus' community relies upon these sometimes extraordinary abilities given to individuals within their midst.

Here we see a transfer of task – the net that six guys were trying to drag along, Peter picks up. In these moments of troublesome abundance, there might be a handoff of responsibilities. The one who started might not be the one to complete a given project. But this blessing, in large measure, depends upon those individuals focusing laser-like on Jesus and on the good of Jesus' community.[18] Only in this manner does the community find strength and unity.

Again, one might notice the hand offs that occurred in the early church. The apostles hand off the food ministry to Greek speaking deacons who are called to serve in the midst of overwhelming growth. Later, the apostles hand off the leadership of the Jerusalem church to James, the brother of the Lord, and the elders. A sequence of giftings reposition people for service at different moments within Jesus' community.

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[18] There are layers of symbolism in this event. John could have merely told us that it was a big heavy net with lots of fish. Instead, he tells us that there are 153 big fish in it. What is the significance of there being 153?

Among the ancients number symbolism was often used to communicate deep secrets or to gesture towards unexpected connections. When a number like this is dropped, we're intended to ponder it.

There's no other place in scripture where a straightforward 153 appears. However, ancient interpreters, such as Augustine of Hippo, noticed that 153 is a number that is the sum of all the integers between 1 and 17 (i.e., 1+2+3+4+5+6 …+17=153). If you search John for a significance to the number 17, another event – an event in which other gospels found numerical significance (Mt. 16:9-10; Mk. 8:19-20) – might grab one's attention. The feeding of the five thousand, which is the only feeding that John narrates, results in leftover *fragments that fill twelve baskets* full from just *five loaves* (6:13) – there's our number 17 (5+12=17). But of the two fish which were shared, no leftovers are mentioned.

Evidently, we're supposed to reflect on the connection – what's similar, what's different? – between the feeding of the five thousand and this event in the early community of the Resurrected One. What does one see by comparing John 6 and John 21?

Here's start: In both cases, Jesus provides for his people in ways that demonstrate his excess of resources but with different results. Following the feeding of the five thousand, the people want to make him king by force – they would compel his resources to their own ends. Consequently, Jesus separates himself from them. When they persist, he provides a teaching so beyond their capacity to understand ('my flesh is true food and blood is true drink…') that they abandon him. The result is fragmentation in Israel – twelve baskets are full of fragments from five loaves; and Israel herself, by seeking only temporal and physical goods, scatters from Jesus.

After the resurrection, Jesus unifies what was by nature scattered – both his community of students who need to become gathered and the 153 large fish in a net. Jesus unifies both the community and the 153 fish by gifting special abilities to specific people within his community. But those gifts, and the community as a whole, are united by obedience to Jesus. The provision is there for the community that is not seeking resources for itself but striving to faithfully follow the Resurrected King.

If one meditates upon these passages, I'm sure there's more. But that should prime the pump for those interested…

7. Finally, everyone comes to the table and although Jesus may not look the same, everyone knows that Jesus is with them and providing for them.

   "Jesus says to them, 'Come eat. And none of the students dared to examine him, 'Who are you?' since they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the loaf and gave to them, likewise also the fish. This was already the third time Jesus appeared to the students (as a group) after he was raised from the dead." (21:12-14)

Session 5

Friendship with Jesus, or What to Do in the Silence
(John. 15:11-15; Mt. 25:14-30; Lk. 17:5-19)

Key Thought:
Sometimes people want God to simply tell them *what* to do. God rarely wants to speak under such circumstances. You probably wouldn't want to either. Instead, Jesus invites us into a new kind of relation – a close friendship between the Teacher and the student. Within that relationship, listening to Jesus is not primarily about being told what to do. Slaves, on the one hand, get very detailed "to do" lists because they cannot be trusted with the overall project. Friends, on the other hand, are not given to do lists; they're invited into the inside of the project and then trusted to collaborate well when they so desire. Paradoxically, this friendship can include long periods of silence amidst the co-working. What matters in not ultimately the number of words that pass between friends but their shared love.

Summary: Thus far we have established a few solid points about hearing God.

- The 'Living God' speaks – typically, through scripture, our own thoughts, or the words of another person – as he wills.
- Words from God possess a distinctive weightiness or density. Much meaning squeezes into a sentence or two, which may be experienced as staggering in implication.
- The character of Jesus – at once full of truth and goodwill – stamps the God-given utterance. In keeping with what is revealed in scripture, God's voice today will always draw out or concretize the specific implications of Jesus being Lord.
- When God desires to re-direct us, he works through the uncanny timing of inner word in relation to external event (synchronicity) and independent, mutually corresponding communication to multiple persons (convergence or triangulation) in order to make his call sufficiently clear for our understanding. This never precludes our capacity to doubt or re-describe the scenario in question. But it does provide sufficient clarity for those to obey who would.

In this session, I want to address an exaggeration that sometimes perverts the disciple-teacher relation.

- My friend, John, told me once: "I just want to know what God's doing *now*. I had an aunt – the Holy Spirit was talking to her all the time. It found her parking spots and told her what to order for lunch. Somehow I couldn't believe it… it just wasn't real… But on the other hand, I feel like God is largely absent. I'm all on my own. There's just got to be some third way – but I don't know what it is."

The third way is friendship with Jesus – friendship is a natural development within a student-teacher relationship.

In Jhn. 15:12-17, Jesus clarifies the relation he would enjoy with his apprentices through a contrast between a slave and a friend.

> This is my command that you love each other just as I loved you. No one has greater love than this, that he lay down his soul on behalf of his friends. You are my friends if you do that which I am commanding you. I no longer call you slaves because the slave does not know what the master is doing. But you I have called friends because everything which I heard from my Father I made known to you. You didn't pick me out but I picked you out and I positioned you so that, [first], you could go

> out and bear fruit and your fruit could remain; and so that, [second], whatever you should ask the Father in my name he would give you. For these reasons I command you to love each other.

A single command fixes the horizon within which the student-teacher friendship relation will flourish in freedom. In this case, the command is the project. 'Love one another as I have loved you.' Therein, Jesus gives us the shape of life he desires, namely, self-giving for others. This *is* God's project – overcoming evil with good through his peculiar form of power *under* others.

By bringing us on the inside of his project, Jesus has made us his *friends* rather than slaves.

- Slaves get detailed to-do lists because they're not entrusted with the main goal. They don't understand the project. Since they're not full participants in the project and its vision, slaves are just told what to do in a piecemeal fashion. "Go here. Do that. Pick this up along the way."
- Friends, on the other hand, are on the inside. They share the main goal, so they can take creative initiative. Friends act together freely based on a common vision of what is good. Friends delight in knowing that the other spoke or acted *just because he or she personally saw something was worth saying or doing*. We value the things friends do – gifts, choices, words, actions – precisely because we didn't have to ask for them. We value them because they were our friend's idea.
- God's project has a great many facets and roles. He is doing many things. Under the vast majority of circumstances, as friends of Jesus, we are simply given freedom to pursue those tasks and roles that we see will contribute to God's project. As we do so, we can be assured both of co-working with God and that God will reveal more specific directions when and if it is best. We act with the presumption of God's presence and coordinated action.

Listening to God *is not* primarily about being told what to do. Nor does God desire for our actions to be only a response to specific instructions or commands from him. Divine to-do lists are exceedingly rare. They're rare because they would impede our friendship with Jesus.

Instead, God delights to see us act freely and responsibly upon what we will increasingly see, through apprenticeship in the Kingdom, to be right, good, and in keeping with God's project.

In the gospels, Jesus provides us with a helpful contrast:

Two passages, Mt. 25:14-30 and Lk. 17:5-19, are key to reorienting our view of how God wants us to act with and to listen to him. These passages alone contain a specific phrase, which Jesus uses to describe someone who does *only* what he is explicitly told to do. This person is a 'useless slave' or an 'unprofitable servant' – it can be translated either way (Mt. 25:30; Lk. 17:10). The useless slave, in both cases, is the one who responds to specific commands, but takes no personal initiative.

- In Lk. 17:7-10, a Master has to tell his slave, who has returned from one task, to prepare and serve dinner. When it is all done, the slave ought not expect a commendation for he only did what he was told. Such a slave is 'useless' or 'unprofitable'.
- In Mt. 25:14-30, before leaving on a journey, the Master calls his slaves and simply 'hands over' his possessions to them.
    - We are told of no specific instructions. There is silence in place of orders. The slaves are simply given charge of a portion of the Master's financial resources.
    - The specific portion given corresponds to the Master's estimate of their personal capacity or potential (Mt. 25:15).

    - Each has received a portion of freedom and (financial) power. Now each must decide what to do with it. The 'useless slave' is the one who, in the absence of a specific command, chooses to play it safe (burying the money) rather than risk initiative to produce good.
- According to Jesus (Mt. 25:30), the ultimate result of refusing to self-direct ones freedom and power will be to find oneself on the outside of God's project and unable to see what God is doing ('cast into outer darkness'). In that state one's life will be full of regret ('weeping') and frustration ('gnashing of teeth').

We need to talk about silence now. We've spent a lot of time speaking about the reality of God speaking to us today. That's important. And it's real. But silence is real too. It's important in every relationship and perhaps even more important in our relationship with Jesus.

- I opened with Dallas hearing something from God – an electric insight – through the mouth of his friend, Earl. It was a direction setting insight at a critical moment. And it's not the only time Dallas heard from God. But I cannot say how frequently it happened. I'd venture to say that God spoke just as much as was needed for his purposes, which of course included Dallas' good.
- But such personally directive words don't always mark long stretches of life. Sometimes they're more initiatory.

Consider Anje's story. Anje Bojažijevič grew up in an Albanian family in Skopje, N. Macedonia – then part of Yugoslavia. As a young girl, Anje was on fire for God. We possess a window into her inner life because we have her journal. She wrote that she wanted to do 'something beautiful for Jesus' – to 'love him as he'd never been loved before.'

- And Jesus interacted with her in very personal and intimate ways. She knew he was with her... helping her. His care was palpable when she prayed. 'My soul', she wrote in her journal, 'is in perfect peace and joy.'
- And God obviously used her well... She felt as if she were 'an instrument in God's hands'. Events lined up. Prayers were answered. Opportunities appeared at just the right moment.
- Moved by this love and the thrill of co-working with God, Anje left her home. She became a missionary and moved to India.

She left everything for God.

Then God left her – at least it felt that way to Anje. There was silence.

She entered into a terribly long and trying time.

- In her journal she wrote, 'Where is my faith? Deep down there's nothing but emptiness and darkness...'
- 'I utter the words of community prayers – try to get out of every word the sweetness it has to give. But it isn't there any longer. I no longer *feel like I'm praying*.'

Nonetheless, Anje carried on. For years this persisted. Then it was decades. But through it she served. She smiled. She encouraged those around her... But inside it was all dryness, darkness, and aching for the sense of God's presence that she once knew...

What do you make of this sort of experience? Was Anje an *authentic* disciple? Was she a friend of Jesus? Was Jesus a friend to her?

What do you think?

Would it make any difference if you knew Anje by a different name?

- When she joined her missionary order Anje Bojažijevič took on the name of Theresa... Eventually the world came to know her as Mother Theresa.[19]
- This sudden and prolonged absence of good feelings is not unique to Mother Theresa. Many devout disciples have experienced it over the centuries...

This silence – the times when feelings flee and we don't hear personal words – is also anticipated in this passage. The master is generous – implicitly inviting friendship through entrusting initiative to his servants. But then the generous master takes his leave. The conversation hits a long hiatus.

What next?

We know what the 'useless slave' does – nothing. The words stop and so does he.

But there is another possibility presented in both passages. By implication, there's the option of being a useful servant – or more accurately a *friend*. Who would be the useful or profitable servant or the friend? The one who knows what to do and does it *without being told*.

This free initiative, in conducting the Master's business, is exactly what sets the 'good and faithful slave(s)' apart from the 'useless slave' in Mt. 25:14-30. Those later praised by the Master, take the initiative to go and 'work with' the talents thus gaining more.

- They are not *told* to do so, they simply see it is a good thing to do and risk it. Much later, upon the Master's return, the slaves are called to give an account. The Master is delighted at their initiative and gain. 'Well done good and confident (or, loyal, faithful, trustworthy) slave. You acted trustily (or, confidently) with a few things. I'll put you in charge of many. Enter into the joy of your master' (Mt. 25:21, 23).
- Self-directing one's freedom and power well, in the Master's interest, results in an increased capacity for significant effect (Mt. 25: 29).

In Lk. 17:11-19, likewise, we are given an illustration of this principle. Ten lepers approach Jesus requesting healing.

- Jesus gives them specific instructions to go present themselves to the priests. As they traveled in obedience, they were cleansed. So far so good.
- But now one, a Samaritan, leaves the band. Taking initiative beyond Jesus' instructions, he alone turns back to give thanks.
- Not only does Jesus commend the Samaritan for his self-directed detour (which delays the commanded trip to the priest), but Jesus says his confident act of gratitude (his 'faith') has *saved* him. All ten had already been healed or cleansed of the leprosy (Lk. 17:14). But this one is saved (placed in the relation to Jesus that God desires) by confidently acting beyond mere command compliance (Lk. 17:19). He is the good and confident slave who sees what is good and acts without being told.

[19] Mother Theresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*

And that's what Anje – Mother Theresa – did for many, many years. In the silence, she tended to dying lepers and fed orphans. She greeted each person who came to her as if he or she were Christ himself – as if her long lost love were in this one who had just crossed her threshold.

Years later, in an interview she was asked what her prayer life was like – what does she say to God when she prays?

- "Oh, I don't really say anything," she smiled. "I just listen to God."
- "Well, what does God say to you?" the interviewer pressed.
- Mother Theresa shrugged. "Oh, nothing. He's just listening to me too."

Here's a student of Jesus bearing witness at the ends of the world. She's heard his voice. He guided her. But then there was silence. Why, I don't really know. She didn't know. And it pained her. Presumably, God has his reasons.

But I do know that the silence was not so utterly complete as she felt. Because God spoke *through* her to many, many people. *Others* received life-giving insights as she spoke and as she refrained. Such testimonies abound.

In the silence God and Anje – Theresa – still listened to each other. And as they listened, they served. Together they healed the broken of the nations. The pain in her silent soul somehow absorbed the suffering around her. And to a significant degree, the world was changed.

In the end, it was not the experience of hearing that mattered but the friendship and love that flowed through it. And, like all true friendships, it could flourish even when words fail.

Summary / Recapitulation:

- Most of the things God would say to us are not instructions or commands.
- Familiarity with God's character, clarity about one's motives, simple assurance of his presence and love, reminders of Jesus' life giving words, insight into the inner logic of scripture, and many more such things flow out of a conversational relation between God and those he dignifies to be his friends.
- As with any friend, we do not speak or listen only to be given orders, nor to tell others everything said. We listen and speak, in turn, because the friend is worth being heard and life together is better than alone.
- And, whenever the time comes that silence sets in – remember that the friendship is deeper and more important than the words that fashioned it. We can carry on our friend's project in love until the conversation is renewed.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

- Can you recall a time when you desperately desired a specific word from God? Why did you want it at that moment? What did you expect that word to do?
- Thinking of Mt. 25:14-30:
- What connection do you see between not employing one's God-given capacities and the resulting incapacity over time to even see how they might be used? How does this make you feel? Is it, for example, comforting, irritating, or frightening?

- What connection do you see between self-direction and a growing capacity for exercising freedom and power well? Why does the master 'take the talent from him [the 'useless slave'] and give it to the one with ten'?
- What is the "joy of the master"? Consider the Master's character in this parable. What gives him joy here? What would it mean to enter into that joy?