

# Listening for GOD

IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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## Introduction

# How Does God Speak to Us Today?

The Jardin des Tuileries, or Tuileries Garden, is the beautiful landscape that surrounds the Tuileries Palace in central Paris. The orange grove of the garden houses the Musée de l'Orangerie, famous for its giant tableaux of Monet's *Water Lilies*. Beneath the trees around the museum are walking paths of fine gravel, perfect for a shady stroll on a bright summer day. We were resting under the trees one day, waiting for the museum to open, when I saw a boy who was about ten years old walking a dog. Or rather, I should say, the dog was walking the boy. The boy had the end of the leash, but the big black dog, excited to be out on the town, was pulling ahead, and the boy was struggling to keep hold of the leash and catch up. As the boy tried to hold his ground, his feet slid on the fine gravel. Finally, losing patience, the boy

ran around in front of the dog and looked him in the eye. “Tu ne peux pas nous conduire,” he told the dog, “Tu ne sais pas où nous allons!” (You can’t lead us; you don’t know where we’re going!)

Sometimes I wonder if God wants to say the same thing to us. Even though we pray “your will be done” each time we say the Our Father, we can easily fall into a one-way conversation with God that is really about asking him to do our will. Our prayers become never-ending shopping lists of things we’d like to see work out our way. It’s important for us to step back and realize that sometimes we don’t know what to ask God for. We can’t lead ourselves because we don’t know where we are going.

Does God speak to us today? Some people doubt it. I’ll admit to being skeptical at times when I hear people say, “God put it on my heart that ...” or “God told me ...,” especially when they are claiming God told them something that doesn’t at all sound as though it would come from God. We surely can fool ourselves into thinking that what is really our will is also God’s will. We can look for signs that validate our own plans or perspectives and mistakenly believe God has spoken. History is replete with individuals and groups who did things that were downright *un-godly* “in God’s name.”

Still, our Judeo-Christian tradition includes many examples of people of faith being led in very tangible ways by a Father who was only waiting for them to say, “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Sm 3:10). Sometimes God leads people in ways that are profound and direct, such as in the case of Moses, to whom God spoke through a burning bush. Other times, people of faith experience God’s presence in mundane routines like their daily work, as did Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. Others see God at work in small signs — serendipitous happenings, strange coincidences, or words that come through others in their lives.

If our heroes of faith learned to listen to the voice of God, why shouldn’t we? Isn’t each one of us called to be a saint? While

we do indeed have to be careful to not merely seek divine confirmation of what we already want or think, I believe that God does speak to us, perhaps not so much in the way he spoke to prophets long ago, but in everyday ways that we can learn to recognize. He is still a Father, and we are his children. God profoundly respects our free will, so he doesn't impose himself on us, but when we ask him to show us his will, he answers.

In popular culture today, many voices compete for our attention. The hectic pace of everyday life, ubiquitous commercial messages, and multimedia platforms can bring so much noise to our lives that we can forget that God is present. But in the midst of this chaos, a still small voice whispers, "I AM." God is trying to get our attention every day. We just have to learn the language he speaks — it's not always what we might expect. God often speaks through words, but not always. Sometimes we hear him in a sudden inspiration, a feeling of reassurance, a sense of his presence, a renewal of hope, or a call to action. All these experiences of God — whether overt and clear or more silent and subtle — can be examples of God speaking to us.

This book is about listening to God. It's about discovering the various ways he is speaking to us, teaching us, and leading us in our daily lives. We hear God in people who are in need. He speaks to us through other cultures; in the beauty and complexity of creation; in the arts; through friends, family, and children; in the talents and gifts we are given; through humor; in the liturgy; in silence; through the saints; in the midst of struggle; and, of course, in Scripture and Sacred Tradition. Let's embark together on a reflective journey to examine how we can listen for the voice of God and so let our hearts be led by the One who knows us better than we know ourselves.

"Whoever has ears ought to hear" (Mt 11:15).

# Chapter 1

## God Speaks to Us in Creation

As we boarded the long dugout canoe paddled by two tribesmen with painted bodies dressed in loincloths, I couldn't help but think, "We could disappear out here, and no one would ever know what happened to us."

It was a hot July day in 2007. Our journey had begun with a search for a new and exotic vacation destination. I had read that hunter-gatherer tribes, though rare in the modern world, have almost no incidence of the psychological issues so common to our culture, such as anxiety, depression, and ADHD. As a clinical psychologist, I was eager to find out whether this was true and what made these cultures so impervious to mental illness. So I looked up hunter-gatherer communities still in existence. Many of them are inaccessible to outsiders; they live under the

protection of governments and NGOs, who have seen the destruction of indigenous peoples and their cultures by disease, deforestation, and forced assimilation. But in a couple of places around the world, it was still possible to see people living as they had for thousands of years. The Chagres River region of Panama was one of those places.

My wife, Ana, was game for this new adventure, so we bought plane tickets to Panama City and hired a guide to take us into the forest. After the signs of city life faded behind us, we traveled bumpy roads through a mountainous area for about two hours. Shortly after we entered the thick rain forest, we came to the end of the road. "From here," said the guide, "you will have to travel by river." We walked down the muddy embankment, mosquitos buzzing in our ears and biting at our arms and legs, and met Emberá people for the first time. The two tribesmen stood next to a canoe that was clearly hand carved from one of the massive rain forest trees. Our guide said a few words to them and then turned to us, saying, "This is where I leave you. They will take you the rest of the way. I'll pick you up here in two days." I didn't remember this being part of the bargain, but we had come this far, so we nervously stepped into the canoe and began the journey up the river.

The trees surrounding the river were some of the thickest and tallest I had ever seen. It almost seemed as if we were traveling through a tunnel as the river snaked its way through the forest. Pushing aside my fear, I began to take in the colors — greens of all hues, light and dark, yellow sunlight peeking through the thinner canopy of leaves on the tops of the trees, and finally little flashes of brilliant blue. I could hardly believe my eyes, but sure enough, there were blue morpho butterflies all around us. It felt as though they were welcoming us into this new world. Anxiety gave way to excitement, and suddenly we felt at home.

We landed on the shore below the village about an hour later. Some of the children playing on the riverbank had heard

the approaching canoe and spread the word through the village that visitors were coming. We were thus greeted by men, women, and children gathered on the shore, dressed in tribal clothing and playing music with reed flutes and animal-skin drums. The children took our hands, and we walked up steep stone steps to the village, which consisted of about twenty-five open-sided, thatched-roof huts fashioned from palm trees and set in a circle with a group meeting area in the center. We set up camp with our “bug hut” mini tents under a larger thatched roof that functioned as a common meeting area for the tribe. They were curious about, and amused by, the supplies we brought, especially the small tents, which they called “little houses.” Since they generally slept in the open air, they wondered why we needed those. After all, we already had a roof over our heads. However, since the hut had no walls, we were not about to take our chances with whatever bugs and other creatures we might encounter in the rain forest in the middle of the night. I was sure there would be critters that we had never seen before, and even the familiar bugs would almost certainly be much bigger!

Thankfully, many of the Emberá, who speak their own language, also knew some Spanish, which allowed us to communicate reasonably well. We learned many things in the course of that first weekend visit, but one conversation stands out. Since this particular Emberá community had very limited contact with the outside world (their presence in the Chagres had only been discovered fifteen or twenty years earlier), we wanted to know if they believed in God. We asked where they thought the world came from.

A villager named Andrea, who was second-in-command of the tribe (and the first Emberá woman to have held such a position of authority) responded to this question. She said, “We believe there is a God who made everything because ... well, look around. We have trees with fruit to eat and spring water to drink. We have



fish to cook and trees to build our homes. There must be a God because look how he has given us everything we need.” Andrea’s words reminded me of the words of Saint Paul in Romans: “For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made” (Rom 1:19–20). Here was an embodiment of these very verses. These people knew God from the things he created. They could see his care for them in the plants, trees, animals, and water he provided.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also points to various aspects of creation to teach us about the Father. He asks his listeners to “look at the birds in the sky,” pointing out that “they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Mt 6:26). Jesus then asks his listeners if they aren’t more important than those birds. Later, he admonishes his followers to “learn from the way the wild flowers grow” (Mt 6:28), and says, “If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you?” (Mt 6: 30). In other stories from the Gospels, Jesus cites other illustrations from nature — the vine and the branches, the fig tree, sheep and their relationship with the shepherd, seeds and how they grow. We sometimes think of these as metaphors, examples Jesus found in nature to explain the things of God. What if it’s the other way around? What if God created these things to teach us who he is?

Years before our initial encounter with the Emberá, I was working as a staff psychologist in an acute care psychiatric hospital and residential treatment center for children and teens with serious psychological issues. Most of the four- to sixteen-year-olds at this facility were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as the result of severe abuse and neglect. Early in my time at this facility, I noticed a certain species of small bird that built nests all

over our campus, some of them low to the ground on ledges, awnings, and windowsills. This placed the birds in close proximity to the sometimes rambunctious children at our center, so we had to be vigilant to make sure the curious kids looked but didn't touch when approaching the birds. I wondered why the birds would make themselves so vulnerable. The birds seemed curious about the kids as well. When a child stopped to look at a nest, usually occupied by the mother bird and her young, the birds would lean toward the kids, looking intently but appearing unafraid. I wondered what these little birds were that seemed so calm in the face of danger. I got my answer when the on-site school for the children in our care started a study of the birds called the "Brown House Sparrow Project." These were sparrows — the same little birds Jesus points to as illustrations of God's care for us: "Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father's knowledge. . . . So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Mt 10:29, 31).

Maybe the sparrows were there in such a visible way to remind these children, who had had such terrible experiences in their short lives, that God had not forgotten them. I started pointing the sparrows out as I walked with children to and from therapy sessions. "That's the bird that built a nest in my windowsill," said one suicidal teen. "That's the bird that landed on my hand," said an eleven-year-old girl who had faced unspeakable abuse in her own home. One child, a six-year-old named Elena,\* had been sorely neglected in her early years. Her mother was an addict who supported her drug habit through prostitution, and she often left young Elena home alone, sometimes without food, to fend for herself. Elena and I spent much time watching the birds, particularly the mother's interactions with her babies, talking about how the mother cared for them and brought them the food they needed. Elena needed to see that there was a different way from what

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\* Name has been changed.

she had experienced. If she was to be successful in a new home after treatment, she would have to allow for the possibility that she could trust someone to take care of her. So God taught her this lesson through the birds he made.

I left my work at that center later that year to start a new family counseling program in our diocese. During my last weeks, I talked with each of my patients, preparing them for the transition to a new therapist. When I told Elena about my impending departure, she looked at me with big brown eyes and furrowed eyebrows and said, “But you can’t leave. You take care of me, like the mother bird and the baby birds.” My heart just about broke.

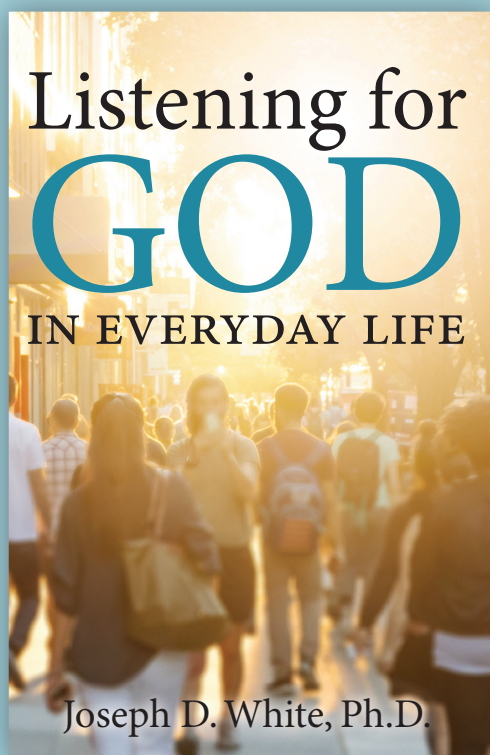
On the day I left, Elena gave me a crayon picture she had drawn as a goodbye present. In the buzz of activity on my last day, I received other pictures and notes from the kids and never had an opportunity to talk to Elena about what she had drawn. On first glance, I couldn’t make out what it was. Weeks later, unpacking my things in my new office at the diocese, I framed Elena’s drawing and hung it on my wall. As I admired it, I was able to make out what she had drawn — a mother bird in a nest with three babies. I keep that picture as a reminder of how God speaks to us of his great love for us through the things he has made.

## **LISTENING FOR GOD IN HIS CREATION**

Reflect for a moment on experiences in which you have been filled with wonder and awe at God’s creation.

What image of nature from Sacred Scripture stands out to you? Why?

Go for a walk in a nearby park (or on an adventure at a natural attraction such as a mountain, waterfall, or canyon). Ask God to help you discover him in your experience of his creation.



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