

SPEAKING TO GOD

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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This morning's gospel lessonⁱ and reading from Jobⁱⁱ describe people trying to speak directly to God, or at least to the Son of God about sitting at his side when he comes into his heavenly glory. Can we really speak to God, or to the now ascended Jesus? How exactly can we do that? What does it mean to do so? What might be some of the concrete results? These are the kinds of questions I'd like to explore with you this morning.

The suffering protagonist of the book of Job tries to speak directly to God, but for much of the book he gets no answer. Here's some of what he says: "Do not condemn me, but tell me the ground of your complaint against me. Does it seem good to you to oppress [me]...Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as humans see? ... Why did you bring me forth from the womb? ... I call to you for help, but you do not answer... You have turned cruelly against me... Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort."ⁱⁱⁱ Not exactly the long-suffering Job who never complains that I was somehow misinformed about in Sunday school. Not exactly the humble penitent asking for God's presence with him. This is a bitter man, who feels that he's been horrendously mistreated by God, crying out to God without pulling any punches.

God does finally answer in Chapter 38, but only by showing his power. He appears in a whirlwind and demands: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall

declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding.”^{iv} This sort of bracing response goes on for 80 verses, concluding with “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond.”^v What can Job say? This is his response: “See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth.”^{vi}

And what does God do? He winds up again with hurricane force and says, “Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you declare to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?”^{vii} Job finally says, “I know that you can do all things...Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand.”^{viii}

So God never explains why Job had lost all his children and livestock, and then why this blameless and upright man had been inflicted with running sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.^{ix} God never responds directly to any of Job’s questions. But Job does come to understand that he’s dealing with ultimate power and would do well not to question it. Along the way, we get beautiful poetry about the glories of God’s creation in nature, as you heard in today’s reading, referencing the morning stars singing, the clouds bringing forth their rain, and animals satisfying their appetite. With my modern mind, I wonder if Job and God really had a direct conversation, as much as Job found a kind of solace by coming to experience the power and grandeur and magnificence of God’s creation in nature, which put his personal problems into perspective.

In today’s gospel lesson,^x two of Jesus’ disciples ask him to commit to putting them in the chief positions of honor, when Jesus comes into his full glory. Jesus

responds, in effect, that only God knows who will share in his glory, not Jesus himself. Then Jesus goes on to explain that their wish should not be to lord it over others, but, to the contrary, to act as servants. If petitioning Jesus is a way of speaking to God, at least after his resurrection and ascension, then we're told that requests for personal privilege and benefits will not be listened to or acted upon.^{xi} The biblical view, putting Job and Jesus together, insists on humans' proper place in the vastness of the universe on the one hand and on the importance of servanthood within the human realm on the other -- putting others before self and ultimately unconditional love unto death.

So, back to the questions with which I began: Can we really speak to God, or to the now ascended Jesus? How exactly can we do that? What does it mean to do so? What might be some of the concrete results? My short answers would be: Yes we can speak to God, but not the way we speak to people on an everyday basis. A primary way to speak to God is through long-established disciplines of prayer and meditation. To do so successfully means that we radically transcend our own egos, or plunge far below them. And the concrete results will not be easy answers, but surprising insights that help us gain new perspective on ourselves and the meaning of our lives, individually and corporately in the world.

Let me give you an example of one method of prayer that fleshes out these answers. A professional person I know -- let's call her Janice -- has gone to a number of retreats where she's been taught about *The Spiritual Exercises* of the sixteenth century Saint Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits. She remembers early on working with a spiritual director named Francis who started her off reading Psalm 25. It says, "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths." Later it affirms that "All the paths of

the Lord are steadfast love." This is how she was told to pray: "Find a quiet space and make yourself comfortable. Think briefly about what you are you looking for. Then slowly read the Psalm to yourself. As you do, stay with any imagery that catches you. Try not to think about it intellectually or figure it out. Instead just let it 'pray you' -- flow over you and through you. Pause and savor whatever draws you or moves you."

Janice at first was struck by words like these: "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted." She found solace in imagery of her feet being plucked out of a net. But it was this line she found herself repeating the most: "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love." During the next few days she took twenty minutes each morning after her daughter had left for school and before she went off herself to work. She sat on her favorite chair in the living room. The Bible lay open on her knee. She read until she found a phrase that touched her. Then she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and let it percolate. This was such a different kind of prayer than she used to imagine she was supposed to do. She was not sending off a series of petitions, which she hoped would be answered.

As Janice came to learn more about Ignatian prayer, she found it increasingly concrete and full of faces. As she's described it to me: "You make free use of your imagination to put yourself right in the midst of the Bible passage that you're concentrating on. For example, as you read the Gospel story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:1-42, you might use all your senses to imagine the noonday sun burning your skin, the sound of Jesus' voice breaking the silence, the sight of sweat-stained clothes and dusty sandals, the smells of sheep and goats in the vicinity, and the taste of cool water from the well."

Recounting the story to me, Janice continued: "You could also imagine how the Samaritan woman progressively comes to see the face of God in Jesus. First he's just an exhausted foreigner passing through her land. Then he's a man talking to her -- inappropriately to a woman in public and to a non-Jew in asking her to share water with him. Then he begins to speak of the living water he brings, which is different from the well water. This particular Bible story had a lot of power for Janice, as she entered into the words and let them "pray her" during early mornings in her living room chair. It was the image of "living water" that provided the greatest comfort. As Jesus said, "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty."

Francis also encouraged Janice to enter into her own imaginative conversation each morning with Jesus inside the story. She remembers asking Him, "What am I going to do with my own emptiness?" She then visualized Jesus turning to her with deep brown eyes and a voice like a bell. "There is no emptiness," he said. But she had expected him to say, "I'll fill your emptiness with my living water." What could Jesus' response mean? Well, why not ask him? So she stayed within her imaginative dialogue and did. He responded: "There's nothing inherently wrong with you. You're okay. You're not empty."

She described all this to Francis in their next meeting. Janice ended by saying: "It was so strange! Of course, this was all in my imagination. But then the make-believe conversation got beyond me. An answer came back that I didn't anticipate, and worse yet didn't understand. But I stayed with it and asked another question. I know I couldn't have made up that answer myself, so it was like a revelation." Janice wondered if her imagination was more powerful than she thought. Maybe she was just accessing some of

her unconscious. Francis' response was: "Stay with that. Pray with that. Ask God's help in discerning what's His voice and what isn't."

Janice explains: "The darnedest part of it is that this actually felt like what I think prayer is supposed to be. I felt like I was having a real conversation with Jesus, and he was answering." Of course our imaginations can be powerful when we begin to give them free rein. On the other hand, the Christian claim is that it's possible, and desirable, to reach beyond ourselves and our own minds to have real dialogue with God in the person of Jesus. Part of what's so valuable in working with scripture in prayer, according to Janice, and then having personal spiritual direction with someone like Francis, is to sort out what's just one's ego and what's coming from beyond or from deep within one's own soul.^{xii}

So, in conclusion: Can we speak to God? Yes, through meditation and prayer. They require transcending our own egos, or finding our way well beneath them. And the concrete results will not be the expected answers but transforming insights that will make ourselves, and the world around us, look very different. That may mean seeing new beauty in the earth and skies, experiencing love in radically new ways, being awestruck by the wonder of creation and finding a mystical harmony with nature, deeply appreciating the joy of human caring and the kinship we all share, or any number of other momentous, stunning ways of learning about why we are here. No matter what we face in life, may we always be able to raise our hymn of grateful praise to the Source of all that is. AMEN.

NOTES

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- ⁱ Mark 10: 35-45.
- ⁱⁱ Job 38: 1-7, 34-41.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Job 10: 2-4, 18, 20; 30: 20-21.
- ^{iv} Job 38: 2-4.
- ^v Job 40: 2
- ^{vi} Job 40: 4.
- ^{vii} Job 40: 7-9.
- ^{viii} Job 42: 2-3.
- ^{ix} See Job, Chapters 1-2.
- ^x Mark 10: 35-45.
- ^{xi} *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 653-654); *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), pp. 45-46.
- ^{xii} The story of Janice and Francis comes from Scotty McLennan, *Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), pp. 147-153.