

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Joseph and Holy Listening”
Matthew 1:18-25
December 16, 2018

Joseph was a dreamer... Now, I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sure I don't want my dreams recorded for the sake of posterity. That might be a bit scary.

But Joseph must have shared his because we have more than one of them in these opening chapters of Matthew.

The first comes right after he's decided what to do about Mary.

Apparently, word had gotten around about Mary and the pregnancy. People were talking, and you can imagine that Joseph is some combination of angry, and embarrassed, and maybe even disgusted.

I don't know, but he's got to be deeply wounded.

And yet... he decides not to **shame** Mary any more than she already is. There's not going to be any Facebook posts or Twitter blasts about her...

to get his anger out... or to save his own reputation...

which, you know, is the temptation right?

But not Joseph. Nope.

Instead he decides to swallow his pride and let her go quietly.

And that kind of gracious impulse... is pretty profound...

But then, Joseph has a dream. And it changes things.

He decides it's a word from the Lord... that he's supposed to go ahead and take Mary as his wife.

This is no small ask.

It's even harder than letting her go quietly, because if he decides to do this and takes Mary as his wife and takes Jesus as his own child... he's taking on all the shame and humiliation of Mary's story and making it his story.

In other words, he's taking the picture he had in his mind about the kind of life and family he wanted... and he is throwing it out the door... because he has a hunch that God is the one asking him to do that.

That's a pretty big step of faith.

Now, I don't tend to trust my dreams that much. If I went around listening to my dreams... then I'd probably have to go back to high school and retake biology....

because I have this weird recurring dream that I've gone back to high school, and it's the end of the semester, and I forgot to keep going to biology and now I'm flunking it... and I'm going to have to retake it to get my high school diploma...

...And then things get really weird when I start to realize that I already have a master's degree and a bachelor's degree... and so why am I worried about my high school diploma? Is it necessary? I'm not sure. But I've got to figure it out...

If I were Joseph, I might just think God was calling me to take a biology class...

or... maybe my dream isn't about a class in high school, but more about some unfinished business that my insecure 16-year-old self still needs to go back and address. It's possible. I don't know.

What I do know, is that dreams are confusing... but Joseph had a dream... and he acted on it... and it changed the direction of his life... and it's the only reason we know his name today.

And this one dream isn't the only dream Jesus' daddy had, is it? Joseph has a few more dreams... that shape what he does.

After Jesus is born, Joseph is warned in a dream that Herod is going to slaughter all the babies in Bethlehem... so he wakes up Mary, they pack up their things... and they become middle eastern refugees fleeing a ruthless dictator (sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it?) ... and end up making a long and treacherous journey across a sea of sand and wilderness until they end up living in Egypt for several years.

Then one day, several years later, Joseph has another dream that suggests Herod is dead... and so he packs up his family to move back to Judea... where Bethlehem was...

until he gets close and has another dream that tells him Herod's son is in charge so it's not safe there... so Joseph keeps going... and takes his family all the way up north... to a little town in the middle of no-where Galilee where they would never be found... a town called Nazareth.

Again, and again... Joseph didn't just have a dream, in some mysterious ways, ***Joseph was listening to God.***

His ears were open to the prompting of God.

I imagine any one of those would have been so easy to miss... or to ignore... but he trusted that there was something of God in these holy promptings...

And because he trusted,

he acted.

And because he acted...

he saved his little boy's life more than once...

And I can't help but wonder... if in all of that... he didn't do something more than simply save Jesus' life.

**I can't help but wonder if in his listening,
and trusting,
and acting,
he profoundly influenced Jesus' life.**

Joseph dearest, Joseph mine, doesn't get much play time in the scriptures... We tend to not think too much about the influence of Jesus' daddy...

In part because he disappears from the story after Jesus' childhood. So, there's a good chance he died before he was able to finish raising Jesus... probably when Jesus was a teenager.

Maybe that first decade of life that Jesus spent with his daddy had a pretty profound effect on Jesus.

I mean, if Joseph were the kind of person to take the shame of another person on himself out of some combination of love and trust of God,

and if Joseph were the kind of person willing to become an outcast himself to do what God was asking him to do,

and if Joseph were the kind of person who seemed to be listening for God in all things, to be aware of God's presence ... enough to act on it... even to the point that it would change the direction of his own life...

then, it seems to me that Jesus might have learned a few things from his daddy.

And if we want to become like Jesus... which is what the Christian life is all about... then maybe... maybe we need to let Joseph influence us too.

Of course, that's going to mean... we will have to learn the art of listening for God's voice in our lives...

and trusting the mysterious voice and calling of God enough to act on it ourselves... which is pretty darn hard, isn't it?

Let's be honest, it's pretty easy to fool ourselves about what we think God is saying... and to fool others... and to really make a mess of things.

In fact, I'm kind of skeptical anytime I hear someone talk with too much confidence about what God said to them... as if they just got off the phone and it was all so crystal clear. "Well, the Lord told me this, and the Lord told me that..." and it gets a bit hard to tell the difference between God's voice and their own voice.

In fact, it's so easy to justify some really bad decisions or to manipulate others when we start slinging around God's name so confidently like that.

So, be careful. And remember **humility** is always key... when it comes to following Joseph's example of listening and acting. ***Humility is essential because you might be wrong.***

And if someone isn't humble when they are telling you what God has told them, then take note.

But that doesn't mean... we should let that keep our skeptical-selves from listening... or trusting. That's the other temptation, I think.

Yes, we need a deep posture of humility, but if Joseph has anything to teach us, then we also need to keep listening... and have faith enough... to act when God calls us to do that.

So, this morning, I want to help us open our ears just a bit more and begin to recognize the ways that God speaks to us because this language about God's voice or God speaking is hard to make sense of.

Your soul has 3 sets of ears: your mind, your heart, and your body.

Each of those are our connection points... to the divine. They are the ways God's soul speaks to our soul.

I could preach a whole sermon on each one of those... because this is another one of the themes in my dissertation... but for now, let me offer you a brief snapshot into what I mean.

Because learning to listen for God in our minds, our hearts, and our bodies... is not just the beginning of becoming like Joseph... it is the beginning of becoming like Jesus.

Let's start by doing a little thinking about our thinking... because God does speak to us through our mind...

Sometimes that's through learning and studying, and sometimes it's through how that learning stretches our imaginations.

Sometimes God speaks to us through stories... and how stories help us think new thoughts about our own life.

Sometimes it's through wonder... and yes, sometimes it's through dreams.

And sometimes... it's just through a new thought that comes into our heads from some unexpected place.

Sometimes we hear the prompting of God just by paying attention to the world and using our minds to make sense of the news...

Joseph probably did that. I imagine he got a bit of news of what the Magi had seen in Harrod... and his mind was churning on it, trying to decide what to do before he even had a dream. Joseph was probably using his mind... and so should we.

God wants us to use our noggin... to read, learn, study, reflect... God isn't opposed to our intellect. God gave us an intellect and an imagination... and God wants us to use them.

But we have to be careful to not use just our mind alone. Because not all thoughts, and not all our thinking, is from God... and this is where it gets confusing.... and where humility is so key.

Those compulsive noisy thoughts that just keep repeating themselves in our heads... may not be from God.

And so, we have to be careful... ***The mind alone, by itself, will lead you astray.***

God also speaks to us through the heart... those subtle impressions of the heart that stir different emotions in us.

Sometimes those emotions are joy and sometimes love.

Sometimes those emotions are anger... or guilt.

Sometimes those emotions are sadness... or hopeful anticipation...

And sometimes... it's just a sense that your heart is opening up in new ways... drawing you to something you don't quite understand... but the heart knows it is true. And the heart is drawing you forward.

But, like the mind, the heart by itself can be deceiving, too. Not all emotions are from God... and so, again, humility is so key.

Even what we think of as positive emotions like joy, affection, and excitement... can sometimes lead us astray if we're not deeply aware of where they are coming from.

Cynthia Bourgeault notes that our culture tends to think that the stronger someone expresses their emotions, the more authentic they are being. But that's not really the case at all.

"The real mark of personal authenticity," she writes, "is not how intensely we can express our feelings but how honestly we can look at where they're coming from and spot the elements of clinging, manipulation, and personal agendas that make up so much of what we experience as our emotional life today."¹

Not all our emotions are telling you what God wants us to do.

But **all** our emotions...

whether you tend to think of them as good or bad emotions,
positive or negative...

all your emotions are like **doorways into what the heart is trying to tell you.**

Don't let them define you. You aren't your emotions, but they are an invitation to hear what the heart is trying to tell you.

MaryKate Morse talked about this when she came last February and did the retreat on listening. She also wrote about it in one of her books.

"Strong emotions are doorways to understanding yourself and your relationship to God," she writes.

"In particular, pay attention to emotions such as anger, anxiety or fear, jealousy or frustration....

In this process it is helpful to ask yourself 'why' questions. If you are afraid, angry or anxious, or [you can tell you're about to be], ask yourself before Christ, *Why? Why am I feeling this way?* [When an answer comes, ask it why? Keep] asking yourself 'why' until you get to the root cause of the emotions.

Almost always the core issue is a spiritual one."²

You see, the Spirit is often stirring deep in that hidden place of our hearts... Sometimes it's quite clear... but often it's rather obscured. So, if you want to learn to listen to God in your life,
you're going to need to learn to explore and listen to your heart...
and recognize what wisdom it is offering you.

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 33.

² MaryKate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership: Power, Space and Influence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 164.

Now, when the **heart and the head** come together... then a new level of awareness comes... and we can begin to hear what God is saying to us in more clear ways.

But *even that isn't the full picture.*

A stool needs three legs before we can trust it enough to sit on it, right?

In order to hear God, clear enough to act,

we need all three legs of the stool...

We need the wisdom of the mind, the heart... ***and the body.***

This is maybe that hardest for us to understand as a culture, but our bodies have their own wisdom. They know things... sometimes before even our mind or hearts are aware.

The body can speak to us in a number of ways. Maybe there is a lightness you feel one day in your body... an energy when you're doing certain things.

Or maybe there is a chronic pain that is flaring up and it's trying to tell you something.... it's speaking about the state of your life and what you're doing to your soul.

Or maybe your heart rate goes up in the presence of someone... or when you're in a certain setting...

God is often speaking to us through both the ***energizing*** and the ***draining*** experiences of our bodies. Again, MaryKate puts it this way:

"Coming to know the mind and heart of Christ happens through our bodies," it takes place "through our nervous system, ...the beating of our hearts, the touch, smell, and sight of life around us. In this world, our spiritual attachments [develop] in finite bodies that are constantly relating to [the physical world around us]."³

If we want to hear God's whispers to us... then we will have to learn to listen to what is stirring in our bodies... to the energy that is opening us up or that we are resisting...

And when are bodies are saying something to us...

and its pointing in the same direction as our hearts and minds...

it can almost be like a great fog is clearing...

or like a vibrant dream... or a deep knowing...

in which we are aware of God's guidance in the most clear and profound ways. And we just know what we're supposed to do... because our ***minds, and hearts, and bodies are all opening and pointing in the same direction...***

That's what it means to hear God's voice in your life. It happens as you are listening to your mind, heart, and body... and you begin to have the ***clarity*** and the ***energy*** to act... on what God is saying to you.... just as Joseph did.

³ Morse, *Making Room for Leadership*, 30–31.

In fact, I wonder if that is what happened for Joseph in his own way at each of these key moments in his story when he had to act.

Maybe he heard news that got his mind churning and his dream put a new thought in his mind about how to deal with the situation he was facing... a thought he didn't recognize as his own because it was different than what he had planned to do... but it stretched his imagination in some way...

And maybe when he woke up, the emotions of peace about the future, or fear about the present situation made his heart quite clear. He knew what direction his heart was telling him to go.

And maybe as he thought about it, his heart rate changed... or maybe he woke up with a new energy to act in his body... and take the steps that he was unsure to take.

And he just knew... he needed to take Mary as his wife, even though it didn't make sense.

And he just knew... he needed to not only get out of Bethlehem, he needed to flee all the way to Egypt...

And when the time came... he knew... he needed to take Jesus and Mary not just back to Judea, but all the way back to Nazareth.

I don't know.

What I do know, is that Joseph was listening.

And when God spoke to him in some clear ways... he didn't brush it off. He acted.

And what I do know, is that our souls have 3 sets of ears through which God speaks to us, the mind, heart, and body...

But we don't tend to listen to all three.

In fact, we tend to just half listen with only one of them, just the mind, or just the heart, or just the body... and miss what God is saying altogether...

Or maybe we get a hint but brush it off or leave it behind in the business of our lives.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

To hear God, what God wants for your life in this time and season...

to really hear God.... in our mind, heart, and body... requires just two simple ingredients:

Time...and... Space. ...⁴

A certain amount of time is needed to be still enough to rest and for your mind, and heart, and body to be open to God and your soul.

A quiet and reflective space can help us begin to hear what is hidden under the cluttering noise of our thoughts, and emotions, and the stirrings in our bodies.

⁴ MaryKate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership*, 162–63.

Christopher Heurtz puts it best when he asks,
“Can we learn to listen to God in our minds, trusting the silence underneath the clutter of noise?
Can we learn to trust the voice of God that speaks in our hearts, through feelings of pain and
peace?
Can we learn to sense God at work in our bodies, speaking to us through our resistances and our
openness?”⁵

I hope so.... I know I want to...
because I do want to become like Joseph...
especially when it comes to following God’s lead for the direction of my life...
and learning to listen to God’s guidance for the sake of my family...
for my little girl and my little boys...
for my wife... and her needs.

And who knows, maybe... maybe if we learn to listen to God speaking to us and act on it... it
might just change the world.

Amen.

⁵ Christopher L. Heurtz, *The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 89.