

“The Voice”

Isaiah 1:10-17

Pastor Jeff Fox-Kline | Sermon for Sunday, September 19, 2021

Our series on essential practices of the Christian life continues today as we are journeying together through the book *The Walk* by Adam Hamilton. We have free copies available here today, or you can contact the church office. Last week, we focused on prayer and worship. I encouraged you to do two things:

1. Make a commitment to worship for all seven weeks of this sermon series. If you missed earlier weeks, you can find videos on our YouTube page, and you can find podcasts and sermons on our website.
2. Make a commitment to praying five times a day: when you get out of bed, at all three meals, and before you go to bed.

I've enjoyed chatting with people about their efforts to walk in faith over the past week. I invite you to make this commitment.

Today, our focus is on the next practice, the next chapter in the book: STUDY.

Studying the Bible and our faith is important, an intellectual pursuit.

The subtitle of the chapter in the book is **“The importance of listening and paying attention.”**

As Christians, we need to listen for God and pay attention to the ways God may be leading us.

The Bible is filled with invitations to listen:

On a mountaintop, the voice of God spoke to a few disciples saying
“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (Mark 9.7)

Jesus concluded a lengthy teaching section saying
Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. (Matthew 7.24)

A mystical scene in the temple concludes with the prophet Isaiah saying:
Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6.8)

And one of the best loved narratives from the Bible encourages us to really listen for the voice of God. Listen....

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. ² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³ the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. ⁴ Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵ and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶ The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸ The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

This is the Bible I was given in 9th grade when I was confirmed at Westminster Presbyterian Church in West Hartford, Connecticut. For several years it sat on my shelf collecting dust, until I was in college and started exploring Christian faith.

I remember one time when I was about 19, I was determined to read the Bible and listen for God. I was at the beach, so I took the Bible and a blanket and went to an isolated spot. I said down with high hopes and opened the Bible. But I wasn't sure where to start and what to read.

I sat there for a while, thumbing through the pages. I received no lightning bolt of inspiration. I did not immerse myself in the text and read for hours. I thumbed through a few pages, noticing that some sand was getting in the spine, and I eventually went home—frustrated and disappointed.

Not long after that, in college I was invited into a small group Bible study, where we had a focus and direction, as well as mutual encouragement. Since then, I've been a big fan of doing Bible study together.

I've also learned how to study the Bible on my own, with the help of certain resources, like study Bibles and commentaries, to help understand complex parts of the Bible and how they might speak to us today.

Jesus told a parable about seeds and soil. Then he interpreted it, saying that the seeds are God's word. We are in what we call "growing season" here at Covenant. The banners on the wall invite us to think about seeds being planted and producing an abundant harvest. With that hope, hear God's word through Jesus, in Matthew 13:

³ Jesus said many things to them in parables: "A farmer went out to scatter seed. ⁴ As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it. ⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. ⁶ But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked them. ⁸ Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one. ⁹ Everyone who has ears should pay attention."

—Matthew 13.3-9, Common English Bible

What kind of soil are you?

How receptive are you to the voice of God, the word of God, the leading of the Spirit?

Bible study helps us make the soil ready to receive God's word.

While we rightly stress the importance of Bible study and taking God's word

seriously, we need to remember, we don't worship the Bible. We worship the God who is revealed in the Bible.

As someone noted last week in the Inquirers Class, here at Covenant, we don't have to check our brains at the door. Sometimes we need to wrestle with the Bible, as there are some complicated and even disturbing sections in the Bible. But overall I see the Bible as God's word for us, reminding us that we are love, and giving us guidance for faithful living. I try to read something from the Bible every day.

I want to share a few of my favorite ways to study and reflect on the Bible.

I have a few study Bibles, with background info, cross references to other related verses, maps, thematic articles and more. We have some of the best study Bibles right here in our church library. If you are interested in a study Bible, let's talk.

I use commentaries, which provide detailed info about passages, helping us to wrestle with possible interpretations. We have multiple commentaries in the library and there are many online.

On the internet two of my favorite sites are:

Bible Project <https://bibleproject.com/>

Enter the Bible <https://www.enterthebible.org/>

And I use two different Bible apps, to read (or listen to!) the Bible in many different translations (and other languages), and to get a daily verse:

YouVersion <https://youversion.com/>

Bible Gateway <https://www.biblegateway.com/>

Jesus came speaking God's word, calling people to turn around and live in new ways, with new clarity of purpose.

God's word is the seed that helps us grow.

God's word comes to us through the Bible—and in many other ways. The parable of the farmer and the seeds has traditionally been understood that the seeds are God's words, the Bible. But maybe the seeds are more than the Bible.

As Adam Hamilton rightly points out in his book, we can listen for God and experience God in a variety of ways:

- Nature, creation
- Music, paintings
- Books, movies, TV [Even a show like “The Voice”]
- Conscience
- Other people

In other words, God is all around us, trying to speak, in many different ways.

Are we listening?

Richard Rohr famously says: We’re already in the presence of God. What is absent is awareness.

So, what’s your homework this week? Adam Hamilton offers some suggestions in *The Walk*, which I’ve amplified a bit. I invite you to consider:

- Read five verses a day
- Read five minutes a day
- Memorize five verses
- Spend five minutes outside in silence

How about you pick one of these?

Friends, the good news is that we have a God who speaks to us—words of challenge, words of guidance, words of hope, words of comfort.

We just have to make space to listen so the seeds can take root and grow and blossom.

Amen.