

## “I’m Listening, God”

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Our lives are full of questions and decisions: What will I wear today? What do I want to make for supper? Should I relocate that climbing honeysuckle? Who’s hosting the family Fourth of July barbecue this year?

These are little questions, nothing you’re going to lose sleep over, and things you can handle on your own.

Then there are other questions: Should I move across the country? Should I stay in this relationship? Should I leave parish ministry for pastoral counseling? How are we going to keep the church going?

These are big questions that can cause you to lose sleep, and they shouldn’t be handled on your own.

Part of being a person of faith is choosing to lead a life in partnership with God or the Divine. As my life unfolds, leading a life in partnership with God or the Divine means that—as best as I can—I walk with love, justice, compassion, mercy, and so on as part of my decision-making, because those are parts of God or the Divine.

When you are trying to discern or find clarity around a big question, the first thing you need to come to an answer is to engage things that are God’s. This can be a little tricky, because the truth is that God’s creation has a shadow, a difficult and dark side that makes space for things like violence, poverty, war, diseases, human trafficking—it’s a long and gruesome list. Those things are not God’s, but they are part of what creation holds—and creation is God’s. So in seeking an answer to a big question, be looking to walk with love, justice, compassion, mercy, and so on in listening for God’s voice. God’s voice will never ask you to follow anything that is counter to love, justice, compassion, mercy, and so on.

When it comes to discernment and hearing God’s voice, our Holy Scriptures are full of verses that teach us about both. In the small sampling of verses that Ellen read for us, we heard assurances like God giving wisdom, knowledge filling you with delight, the Spirit of Truth will guide you, in God we move, and the word of God is living and active. The point is that there is a presence and a guidance that we absolutely can lean deeply into and trust when we need help with the big questions in our lives.

But how do we know when we are hearing God’s voice, also known as a true voice, versus hearing a false voice? Since God speaks to everyone—because, as the UCC says, God is still speaking—how do we discern God’s voice?

The voice of God is typically spoken in the language of love. And God's love comes at us in many ways—through different faith traditions and ways of understanding life with a big “L.” It comes at us through dreams, visions and voices. We can learn to hear God speak through the Church, through the love of people, through the voice of pastors and other leaders in community. When we listen to, read and study the Holy Scriptures and the writings of mystics, God speaks using the voice of our heart. God also speaks through the circumstances we encounter, through repetitions, coincidences and paths made clear and paths with barriers. God speaks to us through the work we do. We also will know God's voice in gut instincts or persistent feelings. So like Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Mary, Jesus and others, we too, can learn how to hear God.

There are many voices and articles out there offering help on knowing God's voice/a true voice over not God's voice/a false voice. I've pulled some of the more common ones together—and will share the summary by end of the day via email. This guidance also comes from my own work with a Spiritual Director and perhaps most importantly, from my own recent difficult discernment to pursue Pastoral and Spiritual Counseling.

To begin with, hearing God means that first we must be must open to hearing—meaning we must have faith and believe in the truth that God/ the Divine/Creation does indeed guide us and will absolutely help us through hard things. The help is there.

Then? We have to listen. Listening can be tricky because we might not agree with what we hear, encounter or receive, but if we have discerned God's voice from our own desires and inclinations, or from the will of others, we can trust and follow what is sent our way.

In seeking God's guidance, the first thing you need to do is pay attention when your life is disturbed or when you are somehow restless in your gut or your heart. Maybe you have a feeling that won't go away, or something that keeps presenting itself in your life through dreams, coincidences, repetitions, persistent feelings. That is God or the Universe getting your attention.

After you have discerned or perceived that the Divine is essentially holding your face in Her hands in seeking your attention, you want to move to a question. This can be where deep and reflective listening from a trusted friend or where Spiritual Direction can be helpful. In all the noise in this world, stripping it all away to get to your question is crucial. Usually your gut and your heart can help you. Always, time, patience, and peace and quiet are helpful.

For me, because it was made clear through restlessness, unsettledness, and internal conflict through the most of last year, I was led to the question “What next?” Now because I know I have learned through experience that I do my best listening while walking, that is the question that I brought with me last fall on all my various walks.

The answer was to follow my heart and fully engage the gifts of counseling and healing that are a part of my being. While this answer made my heart unbelievably happy, it didn't initially make sense. I found it confusing that God/Creation would want me to not lead a church—eventually, I saw that I still will be leading people only in smaller bites and in ways much closer to my heart. This is the super redacted version of what happened. It was actually a difficult process full of tears, doubt, confusion, restlessness. It was tempting to shut it down and just keep doing the

same thing. But I stayed with the process and landed in a place I just know I belong. That's what following God's Voice will lead you. It might take a lot of starts and rests, but you will get there.

So let's look at some of the particular ways of discerning or knowing God's voice or a true voice from a false one:

1) Fruits of the Spirit: In what you are doing or want to do, do you feel love, joy, hope, feel you are moved toward a "Big" life...a life that can transcend what you have now? The feeling aspect of recognizing the fruits of the Spirit is critical. When I had the vision of an office in my barn for one on one counseling, spiritual direction, and dream work my heart truly leapt with joy. Then when I had another vision of small group work, again I felt a deep sense of joy. When I use the word vision, I meant what I saw in my mind's eye came to me, I did not seek it.

2) Peace: Do you have a sense of "rightness", a sense of relief of arrival, a sense in your bones you know you are doing right (even if it's hard) as opposed to knowing in just your head? Again, it is important to feel these things out, not think them out — these aren't rational in the eyes of the world, but they are God's which has its own rationality which involves feelings and faith. The sense of peace is one I totally identified with in my discernment process. While the thought of leaving the church which is where God clearly brought me in the first place — while the thought of leaving was confusing, the thought of doing more intentional and focused work with a few souls at a time brought me a profound sense of peace deep and joy in my center.

3) Never decide from desolation. At my most heightened place of internal conflict, that place inside me where rationality and reason collided with being pulled in a direction led by my heart, that place brought me great despair and pain. That was the place of desolation. When you're in this place, it is terribly tempting to make a decision that makes you want to stay with being comfortable and stay with what you've always known or stay with where others tell you to be. Quite often, God's voice moves us to new things, wants us to grow. Always, that place will be movement in the direction of something God needs and something your deep self desires and loves.

So when you're in a place of desolation, discomfort, despair, the key is to stay in the heat and hold the tension. In time and the truth is, it is God's time you will transcend and rise above between what you know and what you don't yet know. I used to doubt that was true, but my discernment experience has shown me that staying in the heat pays off.

4) God never gives messages contrary to scriptures, which is the same as saying contrary to love. This is important to remember because sometimes, Creation will ask some very difficult things of us. It asks us to follow even when we cannot see where we are going. However you will know the path if the path keeps you walking with the things of God's—things like truth, justice, mercy, compassion, love, the common good.

5) Tears: Listen to your tears and bathe in them, which is like bathing in Holy water. What are those tears telling you? I don't think I ever cried so many tears as I did in 2021. Some of the tears were grief from the loss of my mother, some tears were exhaustion from the pandemic and it's bizarre invisible demands, and some tears were from the disorienting work of psychoanalysis.

The great psychoanalyst Carl Jung's term for the crying phases we go through is called the *solutio*, which is in essence the softening and breaking down of the hard places within by way of tears. A *solutio* phase shows up in multiple ways. Dr. Susan Mehrrens, from the Jungian Center for the Spiritual Sciences, tells us that the *solutio* "acts to annihilate, to dissolve, to remove obstacles, to shift foundations—all of which hold promise for the pain you go through and your inevitable renewal if you can stay with the pain and tension."

6) Surprise is a sign you have encountered the Divine. God's word is often a surprise, as our egos cannot engineer surprises. At first, I was very surprised to find God leading me in a new direction. This is a church, so why would God lead me away. And then different things began to dawn on me, and people were saying things that confirmed my new direction. I worked with my analyst on dreams, and they were also confirming my changes. Perhaps most importantly, I was surprised to find my deep gut settling down in response to my decision to focus on pastoral and spiritual counseling.

7) Finally, in the path of discernment, after you have availed yourself to God, the Divine, Creation's voice—after you have discerned it is a true voice and not your or another's will—the thing that can help you stand the heat, the tension and friction of living into an answer is surrendering. Surrendering gives you the time and space to move with and follow this true voice. Our ongoing anxiousness for immediacy and clarity and assurances can drive us to have our will and not God's will done.

Listening to God or Creation isn't hard, in my view. Pay attention to the signs and the language. This is why it's vital that you spend time alone in quiet, reflecting and feeling. When you're still and quiet, you'll soon feel any restlessnesses coming to the surface. But what is hard about listening to God is following through. If you feel you are being led in a different way and to the best of your ability and with the help of a trusted other, you have to be willing to let things fall apart, let things get messy, walk in the unknown, and feel your feelings.

Don't mistake following God's voice for an easy ride. It's often not because you are breaking away from things that you are used to and have intentionally built up or things that others have put upon you. But in following God's voice—while it might be murky and difficult—you will never be led astray. Your heart and your gut will help lead the way.

One sermon doesn't sufficiently work it out, because discernment is a lifelong and ongoing process. In my view, it is its own form of a spiritual practice. It requires feeling, waiting, listening, trusting, patience, and faith. It requires risk-taking and a willingness to being uncomfortable and not knowing. It requires paying attention to your feelings and information that comes your way. Most of all, I think discernment requires faith that the Universe in all its infinite wisdom, knows what it is doing when it comes to the particulars of your life.

My prayer for you is threefold:

1. If you don't have a regular practice of being still and quiet, that you begin one.
2. You pay attention to how your inner and outer world communicate with you.
3. You have faith that God/Creation has wired you in particular ways and cares that you live into those places as best you can.