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## We hear God with the same ear God hears us

by Michael Leach

Soul Seeing

*Be still and know that I am God!* (Psalm 46:11).

Growing up Catholic nobody taught me to listen to God. Parents and teachers taught me to talk to God. They said prayer was praising God, telling him you love him or you're sorry, asking God for something and then thanking him whether you got it or not. The only person who suggested that prayer was listening to God was my Uncle Barney, who was a Protestant, and I didn't pay attention to him because he was Protestant, what did he know?

In the seminary our spiritual directors taught us about meditation and contemplation, the latter a gift of wordless prayer reserved for mystics and saints whose palms bleed, so forget about it. They trained us to meditate by thinking about a scripture or imagining ourselves in Jesus's time but they never taught us to be still and experience the love of God that's here and now. Our first spiritual director, Fr. Skippy Krost, was a contemporary of St. Ignatius. (He dragged his right leg as he swept down the aisle of the chapel each night, and thus in their charity generations of seminarians had dubbed him Skippy.) I dreaded when Skippy would have us close our eyes and clench our foreheads into fists and imagine looking up at the foot of the cross with all our might. The purpose was to feel Jesus' blood falling on our heads and burning our eyes, reminding us of how much we made him suffer for our sins. That was one of our meditations before trying to go to sleep.

Fortunately, once a year we had a five-day silent Ignatian retreat. How peaceful it was to walk around the lake with the encouragement to "listen for God" and "find God in all things." Suddenly, the monkey brain would stop chattering and you'd stop in your tracks and know what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins knew: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." Somehow, if only for a moment, everything was where it was supposed to be. It was moments like that that stanch the bleeding.

Vinita Hampton Wright in her book *Days of Deepening Friendship* encourages everyone to "spend a few moments each day quietly listening for God. Don't say anything or ask for anything. Or if you do ask for something, may it be, "God, help me tune in to your voice." ?

It's taken me a lifetime to appreciate that prayer is not about pretending to be in the past or asking about the future but about being awake and aware in the presence of God. Slowly, yearly, through a little bit of wisdom and a lot of suffering, I am coming to realize that the most beneficial prayer is listening.

Listening to "the still, small voice" that is "not in the wind, not in the earthquake, and not in the fire" (1 Kings 9:11-12) but in our very being.

God is talking to us all the time but we're either too busy talking to God or obsessing on our own thoughts to have "ears to hear" God's soothing voice (Mark 4:9). I have spent a major portion of my life thinking about what other people are thinking about me, and feeling guilty about anything related to being alive. And all that time God has been saying to me, gently, softly, persistently, "I don't want to kill you, I want to heal you, give you peace, assurance and joy."

When I meditate now, here is how I meditate: I sit straight and watch my thoughts without evaluating them. I can do that for up to two seconds at a time now. So when that falls apart, I just ask God a question, and listen for the answer. The question I ask the most is, "What do you want me to know, God?" And the answer is invariably the same: "I am here for you."

If "we see God with the same eye that God sees us," as the mystic Meister Eckhart says, then it must be also true that we hear God with the same ear God hears us.

"I am here for you!"

God is here for me, and I am here for God. It's like walking around St. Mary's Lake all over again.

[Michael Leach is editor of *Soul Seeing* and editor at large of Orbis Books.]

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