In the summer of 2003 Janet and I were taking a boat tour of Loch Ness, in the Scottish Highlands. And no, we didn’t see *Nessie*, the Loch Ness monster.

In the boat with us were two other families. One was from South Africa. They had just moved to London and came to Scotland on holiday, they explained to us, to learn about their new neighbors to the north. The other family was from Geneva, Switzerland. The father, a tall, quiet, reserved man, spoke to his children in German while the mother, a small, petite blond, conversed with them in French. They had four children with them on the tour, the mother explained to us, the oldest of which was nine, plus a baby back at the hotel with the nanny. The oldest child, a girl, tall like her father but fair-haired like her mother, spoke to her parents and siblings in three languages. Curious, I asked her mother how many languages she spoke. Five, was the mother’s response, and she was studying Hebrew!

It made me feel very small, and limited in my linguistic abilities. And, it reminded me of a joke. What do you call a person who speaks two languages? Bilingual. What do you call a person who speaks only one language? An American.

I told that story later that summer to a friend in Aberdeen. He made me feel better. When I admitted to feeling ignorant about my inability with other languages, he asked me how many states surrounded Arkansas. “Well, let’s see... there’s Missouri to the north, Texas and Oklahoma to the west, Louisiana to the south, and Tennessee and Mississippi to the east. That’s six.”
“If they were all different countries, rather than states,” he explained, “and each had its own language, chances are you would speak your language and six more.” If that were true, I might feel like I lived in the land of Babel.

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways,” the writer of Hebrews tells us. I wonder what language God used.

God came to Abraham, when he still lived in the land of his fathers, and told him to pack up and go to wherever it was that God wanted him to journey. Imagine what faith and determination it took for Abraham – or Abram, as he was known then – to do such a thing. After all, he was seventy-five years old. I wonder what language God used when he first spoke to Abraham. Whatever it was, God evidently knew how to use that language persuasively.

Hundreds of years later, God spoke “by the prophets,” we are told. Isaiah says that one day, while administering his duties in the temple, he saw the Lord “high and lifted up,” and heard the Lord say to him, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” How did God say it? What language did he use?

The scriptures are filled with the testimony of those who say the Lord spoke to them. “But in these last days,” the author of Hebrews says, “he has spoken to us by a Son...” And when we hear that we get the idea. It is not a particular language we are to think about here, it is the means by which God speaks to his human creation. When God speaks, our concern should not be how God does it but through whom. In other words, God doesn’t speak to us by means of words, but through relationships. Our particular faith expression tells us that when God speaks, the only language God uses is Jesus. Jesus embodies all that is right and good about God.

In fact, Jesus is God’s final word. In his classic book, The Carpenter’s Son, Carlyle Marney writes, “We all remember how precious is the word of a loved one when it turns out to have been his last word. Letters are treasured and memorized. Words meant casually are given incredible meaning. Time and again the church grasps for some new word, but we are always driven to the last thing God said for sure.” That last thing God said for sure is Jesus.
In a recent PBS series on the Civil War, a letter sent from a young soldier to his mother is shown. At first, it is written in the classic hand of that age, with a sweeping style and conveyed with the rather flowery way of speech that was so common in that time. The young man reveals his anxiety and fear in regard to the battle that is imminent. Tragically, the last part of the letter is written in a quite different hand after the battle has been fought. This time the handwriting is scrawled hastily, not in small, measured movements but large and disjointed as the young soldier explains to his mother that he has been mortally wounded. You can practically see the young man’s spilled blood between the lines as he writes. This will be the last his mother ever hears from her son.

It is our belief that the last thing God said is Jesus.

In the spring of 1998, Janet and I took my parents to Washington D.C. for my mother’s 75th birthday. One afternoon we made our way to the relatively new Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorial. My parents were young adults when Roosevelt made his mark on the American psyche, and as we wandered along, taking in the sights, my Dad said quietly, quoting the late president, “I hate woah (war). Eleanoah (Eleanor) hates woah.” Those words were obviously burnished in my dad’s memory. At the time they were spoken, Dad was a young man, and as far as he knew then, was eligible to participate in the great war that was erupting in both Europe and the Asian islands.

But my guess is that the words most Americans associate with President Roosevelt were, “The only thing we have to feah (fear) is feah itself.” Why? Because, as Thomas Long says, “these were not simply words about courage, they were words that generated courage. Hearing them did not merely convey information about being confident in the face of fear; hearing them evoked that very confidence, created a world where that boldness could be possible.”

When God spoke through his Son, God did more than talk about his presence in the world, his love for his human creation, his desire to see that the heavenly kingdom might be present on earth. God evoked his very own Spirit in the One who was his Word, who embodies all that God is, and who speaks even now – right now – to you and me.
The only problem is, Jesus doesn’t speak to us directly. It would be so much easier if he did, but evidently that isn’t the way God chooses to do things.

I am reminded of my late friend Tom Logue. When his son Tommy was dying with Muscular Dystrophy, Tom kept a journal, later published for his friends. Tom admitted that he was having trouble understanding pain and suffering and especially incurable diseases such as the one that had taken over his son’s life.

Tom wrote, “About the only thing that really helps me is to realize what havoc would happen on earth if all our prayers were answered. Life would become too simple also. If I had a headache, I would get rid of it with a prayer. If my tomatoes were not doing too well, I would make them strong and vibrant with a prayer.

“What are you trying to say to us, Lord? Lord, it’s a question mark this time and not a comma. And while I am on the subject, Lord, could you talk a little louder?”

That’s it! We don’t care what language God uses to communicate with us, we are confident that God will enable us to understand it. What we want God to do is talk louder so we can hear in clear and certain terms.

But according to the writer of Hebrews, God has spoken loudly enough. And God chose to do it in Jesus. If that is true, what did God say through Jesus?

Are you familiar with the doubt that plagued John the Baptist? Jesus’ public ministry was not coming about the way the Baptist thought it ought to be. And it wasn’t as if he didn’t have a stake in it either. He was the one who had served as Jesus’ forerunner. He was there when he heard the heavenly endorsement, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” He had been the one to baptize Jesus, for goodness’ sake, and now is languishing in prison for having gone to all that trouble. Hearing what was going on outside his prison cell, John is beginning to have his doubts about Jesus.

So he sends his disciples to question Jesus. After all that had happened, this is what the Baptist wants to know: “Are you the one” (meaning the Messiah), “or should we look for another?” Do you remember what Jesus said in response? “Go
and tell John what you have seen, how the lame walk and the blind see and the deaf hear.”

What does that mean? It means the proof is the pudding. The words don’t mean a thing unless they are revealed in what happens, and what happens at the hands of Jesus is that all that is wrong with our world is made right. Well, if that’s the case, at least as it appears to us, then God definitely needs to speak a little louder because there’s still plenty wrong with our world.

“Are you the one, or are we to look for another?” The writer of Hebrews, whoever he was, answers that question for us with a resounding Yes! He is the one. Then why doesn’t God speak a little louder?

Maybe it’s because we’re not listening. Sometimes, the most important things that are spoken are when nothing is said at all.

The gospels tell us what Jesus said, at least what the authors of the gospels think were the important things he spoke. There’s the Sermon on the Mount, the question put to his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”, the parables and the teachings. The fourth gospel, John, especially tells us things Jesus said that the other three gospels don’t mention. But there’s one thing none of them say. They don’t tell us at what point Jesus finally and fully realized his destiny would be that of a cross. They do inform us when he told his disciples. Luke describes it as when he set his face toward Jerusalem. But that moment when it came fully and decisively into the mind and heart of Jesus that the cross would be the inevitable place for him... when did that happen, and where? How did he get that word from God?

We don’t know. And I think there is an obvious reason for that. Jesus was alone with his heavenly Father when it came to him. It was one of those moments that are described in the gospels, when Jesus goes out into the dark, away from his followers – away from the noise of the group, the crackling of the fish over the campfire, the arguing, the laughing, the fellowship of being together – and he seeks refuge in his thoughts and prayers and companionship with the One who guides him and, yes, speaks to him.
What we aren’t told about in the gospels is the deep, deep silence in which Jesus listens to his Father.

Jonathan Sacks is the chief rabbi of Great Britain. He explains that Judaism is a noisy religion. “Jews pray together loudly,” he says. “They study scripture in groups, and argue passionately with each other.” But then he goes on to say that sometimes you learn the most about your own religious faith from an encounter with someone who is of a different faith.

He tells a story about Mother Teresa who was once asked by an interviewer what she says to God when she prays. Her answer? “I don’t say anything. I just listen.” The interviewer isn’t satisfied with that. “What does she hear God say?” he wants to know. “He doesn’t say anything. He just listens.” And then she says to her interrogator, “And if you can’t understand that, I can’t explain it to you.”

So when it comes to the question as to what God talks like, when it comes to God’s speaking to you, it is essentially an answer you will have to provide for yourself. But know this: however God speaks to you, you can be assured the message will go straight to your heart. And when all is said and done, that’s really all that matters, isn’t it?

Lord, speak to us that we might speak... as much by what we do and who we are as by what we then say in response. And in that doing and being, may you find great faith. Through Christ our Lord, who is your final Word, we pray, Amen.

Notes


