

“Be Quick to Listen”

Jeremiah 6:16, Micah 6:8, Song of Solomon 2:8-10, Psalm 23, 119:45, Matthew 6:34, 11:29, Mark 1:35, John 1:4, 8:12 & James 1:17-19

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Prayer for Understanding Gracious God please help us listen to your good news. Amen

Mother Teresa said: “Listening is the beginning of prayer.” William McGill wrote: “The value of persistent prayer is we will hear God.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: “Just as our love for God begins with listening to God's Word, the beginning of love for others is learning to listen to them.” Malcom Muggeridge wrote: “Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us and the art of life is to get the message.” Henri Nouwen said: “Prayer is first of all listening to God. Prayer is openness. God is always speaking.”

All three creation accounts in scripture proclaim that God created life by speaking which implies that life flourishes when there is listening. In one account, six times God speaks, there is listening, and creation happens. In other account, God's ruah, breath, voice, is given to dust, the dust listens, receives, and humanity is created, sustained, and will be resurrected. In another account, scripture proclaims: **John 1:4 “The Word gave life to everything.”** Listening is life and love.

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs wrote: “Listening is an art, a skill, a religious discipline, the deepest reflex of the human spirit. One who truly listens can sometimes hear, beneath the noise of the world, the deep speech of the universe, the song creation sings to its Creator.”

James proclaims: **James 1:17-19 NRSV “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the God of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of God's own purpose God gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of God's creatures. You must understand this, my beloved siblings: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.”** Be quick to listen.

Annalisa Barbieri said: “Listening, I discovered, was not just about waiting for the other person to stop talking, or asking good questions, or even not interrupting. Listening is really hearing what the other person is saying, and why they are saying it. Being interested and curious. Good listening is about approaching what has been said as if you have never heard it before. Put simply, it is about paying attention.” Scripture proclaims that the antidote to worry is listening to God. The gospel of Matthew proclaims: **Matthew 6:34 MSG “Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and do not get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow.”**

A good spiritual director helps people listen. They ask questions. They invite others to explore, be curious, to listen to their story and how their story is a part of the story of God's love for the cosmos.

Rabbi David Wolpe wrote: “In the Bible, Joseph tells his siblings his dreams and they hate him for it, and he is eventually sold and ends up in a prison in Egypt, where he listens to the prisoners' dreams and Pharaoh's dreams and becomes the viceroy of Egypt. Joseph falls by dreams and rises by dreams. Joseph falls when he can only hear his own dreams. Joseph rises when he listens to the dreams of others. In our nation at this time, some can only hear their own dreams. And we will rise, as a nation, when we learn to listen to the dreams of others.”

Scripture proclaims: **James 1:19 “Be quick to listen.”**

Many interpret the Song of Solomon's illustrations of love between lovers as also God's love for everyone. Ardent lovers listen well. Lovers are attuned to their partner's essence. One experiences love when they listen to God. Scripture proclaims: **Song of Solomon 2:8-10 MSG “Look! Listen! There is my lover! Do you see them coming? Vaulting the mountains, leaping the hills. My lover is like a gazelle, graceful. Look at them there, on tiptoe at the gate, all ears, all eyes — ready! My lover has arrived and they are speaking to me!”** Eager for love they are listening attentively for their lover: every thought, every action is attuned to their movements as their heart thrills to listen to every word. Lovers demonstrate a high degree of very focused attention for each other, and it is this attention that makes love wondrously renewing.

Hearing and listening are different. Hearing is the process of perceiving. Listening is paying attention to a message in order to understand and respond.

There are a variety of ways to listen to God: read scripture, listen to music, look at art, soak in wonder, perceive beauty, notice nature, enjoy sabbath, listen to the goodness, the image of God, within each person, enjoy silence, reflect on your dreams, thoughts and intuition, and savor peace, joy and love. We listen to God by creating: making art, music, structures, journals, books, clean laundry, delicious meals, daydreaming and breathing. We listen to God by holding gracious space. We listen to God by being curious, exploring and asking questions. A crucial way to listen to God is to regularly schedule time to do nothing in a quiet place even if you can only spare a few minutes. Scripture states: **Mark 1:35 NLT “Before daybreak, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray.”**

I listen to God through a visualization prayer. I imagine I am hiking with Jesus. I listen to what God wants me to hand over to Jesus, listen to what Jesus wants to do with me, and listen to what Jesus wants me to do on my own. God and I camp at a spectacular place I once camped at by myself. God and I sit by a fire at the end of a glacial lake with rugged snowcapped mountain peaks around us. We extinguish the fire. God and I lay on the cradling soft mossy soil, smelling purity, hearing the lap of the water, mesmerized by the stars. Time evaporates. My breathing and heartbeat dance with the cosmos. I listen to God. I took numerous mental snapshots. Often, I recall a mental snapshot of this time of listening to God which in an instant comforts me.

“Be quick to listen.” We can listen to God by walking. Saint Augustine said. “It is solved by walking.” Jesus invites us. **Matthew 11:29 “Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.”** The rhythm of walking connects one with their breathing, heartbeat, and essence and connects them with God, the cosmos and life. A listening prayer is walking in beauty, in rhythm with all things, in rhythm with past, present and future, in rhythm with feelings and thoughts, in rhythm with the vibration of all matter and space, in rhythm with God’s created order.

The psalmist sings: **Psalm 119:45 “I will walk about in freedom for I have sought your teachings.”** The prophet Jeremiah declares: **Jeremiah 6:16 “Ask where the good way is and walk in it and you will find rest for your souls.”** The prophet Micah declares: **Micah 6:8 “God has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”** Jesus said: **John 8:12 “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”** John states: **1 John 1:7 “God is light. If we walk in the light we will have fellowship with one another.”**

The 23rd Psalm describes God walking with us. God leads us to green meadows and peaceful streams to restore us. God guides us along right paths. Even when we walk through the darkest valley, we are comforted by God walking with us. God takes us on walks to feasts, overflowing cups and spaces of blessings. The entire time goodness and steadfast love walk with us. Together, God and each person, walk to the house of the Lord where we will live forever.

Pastor Glen Bell writes: “Walks slow me down. Walks open my heart. Walking invites me away – at least for a few minutes – from the promises and temptations of technology. Walking puts me back in my body. Walking points me to the Creator whose goodness and beauty surround every step. Each life step invites you and me into a whirl of creativity, reflecting awe and wonder in God’s creation.” Walking reveals that life is more fragile, more resilient, and more beautiful than we could ever imagine. The beauty of God’s creation discloses robust goodness and grace with every step. Each new moment becomes another opportunity to dream, imagine, and envision the Holy Spirit’s lively presence in and through us. Walking is an opportunity for us to dance with the community of faith, leading, following, learning new steps with both hesitancy and joy, tripping and even sometimes falling. In this dance, something new is experienced. Something new is created. Something new rises as a blessing for us all.”

“Be quick to listen.” We can listen to God by savoring joy. Poet Mary Oliver wrote: “If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, do not hesitate. Joy could be anything, but very likely you notice joy in the instant when love begins. Anyway, whatever joy is, do not be afraid of joy’s plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.”

Poet Tess Taylor wrote: “Joy is not made to be a crumb. That is a sentence I savor — it reminds me that joy is maybe so much bigger than we often let joy be. Noticing joy can be a guiding force, helping us name what matters in our lives. Joy helps us discern what we love, and, just maybe, helps us figure out how we want to live.” Joy is linked to rest. Joy is a window that offers antidotes to our culture’s chronic rage; listen, process,

unplug, forgive, transform and rejuvenate. Writing about joy. Writing poetry interweaves us with God, interweaves us with each other, interweaves us with the cosmos. Prayerful listening is noticing your delight. Prayerful listening can involve writing poetry. Poems can be listening ears that offer us spaces for the unexpected, spaces for noticing, spaces for holding vulnerability, complexity and contradiction, spaces for God's goodness and love, spaces for joy. Poems can be places where we can explore what is unsettled and where we can explore the art of changing our minds. The psalms are Hebrew poems, usually in rhyming couplets, which have enabled generations to listen to God. Taylor wrote: "Joy can be an excellent teacher. As a teacher of poetry, when I lead a workshop, I ask that my poetry students not begin with critique. It is always easy to say what you do not like about something, easy to point out why it might not work. Instead, when students read each other's new poems, I ask that each new reader name a delight. We anchor in pleasure — a word or a funny moment, the music of a slant rhyme. Focusing on delight helps a writer to know what to do more of. It helps a reader find out where their sensibilities lie. We are better off learning to write and imagine towards what delights us than trying to skirt the edges of what might not. What if we take this out of the writing classroom — or out of the poetry column — and into our lives? As we face down the questions of coming months, what might centering rest, delight, joy and even a bit of poetry bring to the process?"

"Be quick to listen." Go for a walk. Listen to God who is pure joy. Discover your joy. Savor joy. Imagine yourself--joyful. Imagine the world--joyful. Imagine a future where we delight in one another, where we delight in the cosmos and the cosmos delights in us. Listen to God's delight in you. Listen to joy. Walk with joy. Follow joy to abundant life for all. **"Be quick to listen."** Amen