

Column

“God told me to get naked” read a headline in a Louisiana newspaper a few years ago. Like most preachers and writers, I keep a file of clippings and story notes. Many never see the light of day. This one, however, is too good to go to waste.

The story goes like this. Police in Thibodaux, La., were summoned after a man with the last name of Mohamed was seen parading through the downtown area at 2 a.m. wearing no clothes. Upon being apprehended he said that God told him to get naked and walk the streets in order save his soul.

Another story of God speaking – equally bizarre -- comes to mind. In 1987, a well-known television evangelist announced that God had spoken to him warning that if his supporters did not send in \$8 million dollars within three months, He was going to ‘call him home’. The ploy worked! He received \$9 million.

Did God speak to him? Was he deluded, or, less charitably, was this just a ploy in a clever and apparently successful fundraising appeal? God knows.

The question for us is: Does God speak and, if so, how can we know that it is God we are hearing and not some other spirit?

I would want to boldly assert that God does speak. In the Old Testament, we find Him calling Abraham out of the Ur of the Chaldees, speaking to Moses out of the burning bush and calling and revealing his will to the boy Samuel.

Nor, does God seem to be silent in the New Testament. At Jesus’ baptism a voice is heard out of heaven saying, “Thou art my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”

Moreover, there have been many in Christian history who claim to have heard God’s voice, and the phenomenon is not unknown today. These stories are beautiful and inspiring, and we have no reason to doubt their authenticity.

God speaks, but how do we know we are hearing Him rightly? How do we test the voices and impulses that are in our head and heart? The chief way, I want

to suggest, is by putting them alongside the whole of Scripture and seeing how they measure up.

Let me give you a rather absurd illustration. You see something that doesn't belong to you. You think you hear God telling you to go ahead and take it. You even fancy you have scripture on your side. After all, doesn't Paul say in 1 Corinthians 3:21: "All things are yours"? Is it God's voice you are hearing?

The answer is obvious: you need to test the voice you are hearing by the whole of scripture. When this is done, it quickly becomes apparent that this voice is not from God. "Thou shalt not steal" is God's word to you.

Would that all life's dilemmas were so straight forward? Nevertheless, this is the place we must begin.

If Mr. Mohamed had followed this approach, he might have stayed out of jail.

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light riseth up in darkness for the godly; Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what thou wouldest have us to do, that the Spirit of Wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in thy light we may see light, and in thy straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer)

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