

HOW DOES GOD COMMUNICATE WITH US?

Acts 10

Dr. Ronald B. Rice
West Side Presbyterian Church
February 11, 2018

I preached on this text 3 weeks ago. My point then was about the radical change this event made in the early church as the gospel was taken to the Gentiles.

But today I want to explore another important issue that this story raises. How does God communicate with us? Does he still speak to us through dreams and visions, like he did to Peter, or send angels, like he did to Cornelius?

About a dozen years ago, I met a young woman in Nigeria with an incredible story. I was so amazed that I set up my video camera and asked her to look into the camera and tell her story. Binta Faruk Jalingo was from a royal Fulani family and of course a Muslim, as almost all Fulanis are. Her father was a retired high ranking military officer. She was a university graduate and a television producer with the national television network. She was married with 1 year old twin sons. She hated Christians, and generally did what she could to make life miserable for them.

One night as she and her husband slept, suddenly a bright light appeared in the bedroom, and a mighty wind swirled around and blew the pictures off the wall and threw everything on the shelves to the floor. Of course they were terrified. Her husband got up, got some folk Muslim charms and put them on hot charcoal he got from the kitchen to make smoke and drive the evil spirits away. Then a voice came like thunder, "You have been baptized by the Holy Spirit, go and be a Tabitha to my people." She asked her husband if he could understand what the voice was saying, but he said he didn't hear a thing. He accused her of belonging to a secret cult and kicked her out of the bedroom to sleep in the guest room.

The same thing happened the next night and again 3 nights later. Each time was an invitation "to come and serve." She told her husband that she would be disobeying God if she did not heed his voice, and would rather die than disobey God. She told him she was going to become a Christian and was going to go to church the next Sunday. She said she would only follow Islam again if her husband could take away what Jesus Christ had given her. But she said that was impossible, because no one could take away the joy and peace that had flooded her heart. On Saturday she went out and bought a Bible and on Sunday got in her car and drove to the nearby Baptist church. When she got home, her husband beat her and struggled to tear up the Bible. She told him the danger of tearing the Bible, that he could do anything to her, but not with the Bible. He stomped out the house.

On Monday her husband called her father who arrived late Tuesday evening. As she went out to greet him, he started beating her so severely that she lost

consciousness, and they finally had to take her to the hospital. On the third night in the hospital, about 2:00 in the morning, she felt someone touching her feet, and woke to see a figure standing at the foot of her bed, with a face shining like the sun, so bright she couldn't see his face. She screamed for help and when the nurse came she told her what she had seen. The nurse said it must have been Jesus, and to not be afraid, and if he came again to ask him what he wanted from her.

Sure enough a couple of hours later, he appeared again, touched her feet and woke her up, and said, "Be bold, for this is temporary; you will overcome the temptation." When she got out of the hospital, her husband gave her a divorce letter, kicked her out and she never saw her twin babies again.

Binta's father and some Islamic fanatics took her to a house and chained her feet and hands. Two days later they freed her hands, but left her feet chained for seven more days, threatening to kill her if she went to church again. Her mother's brother came to reconcile her to her father, but her father picked up a gun and fired at her. She flinched at the sight of the gun which overturned her chair and she fell to the floor, while the bullets hit the wall.

Next her father was able to have her thrown into prison on false accusations, where she sat for six months without trial or bail. In the 7th month she was convicted and sentenced to two years imprisonment. She fasted and prayed for 3 days and a month later she received a pardon from the president of Nigeria. She told me more stories of her persecution and some amazing narrow escapes and how God had protected her.

In the prison she heard the voice again in the night, calling her to be a Tabitha. Tabitha or her Greek name Dorcas, was the woman in chapter 9 of Acts who had died, and she was the reason Peter had come to Joppa, where he had this vision of the unclean animals. Tabitha had a ministry to widows and Binta realized God was calling her to establish a safe refuge for former Muslim women who had been kicked out of their homes and marriages after they became Christians. I gave her some money to help her buy property in a safe Christian area not far from Jos. If you Google her name you'll find at least a dozen websites that have picked up her story, which is amazingly courageous and bold, as Jesus told her to be in the hospital, because her life is constantly at risk and most Muslim background believers (MBB) certainly don't want their names on the Internet. At last report she is married to a pastor, raising a family and running her Tabitha refuge.

Dr. David Garrison is a Baptist scholar and researcher who published a blockbuster book in 2014 entitled *A Wind in the House of Islam*. The House of Islam, *Dar al-Islam* in Arabic, is the name Muslims give to an invisible religious empire that stretches from West Africa to Indonesia, encompassing 49 nations and 1.6 billion Muslims. The book summarizes Garrison's 2½ years of research,

interviewing over 1000 former Muslims who had become Christians in 9 different geographical and cultural regions in this vast religious empire.

Garrison was documenting what he calls movements, large groups of former Muslims who have become Christians. He defined a movement as at least 1000 former Muslims who have become Christians and been baptized in the past one or two decades, or at least 100 new church starts over the same time period, within a given people group or ethnic Muslim community. He showed that in the 1300 years since the prophet Muhammad, there have been very few such movements of Muslims becoming Christians. There were only 2 such movements in the 19th century, only 11 in the 20th century, but in the last few years there have been an unprecedented 69 movements to Christ in 33 Muslim people groups in 14 countries.

So how and why are these Muslim movements taking place today? What is God using to bring hundreds of thousands of Muslims to Christ? Why is it happening now, and why not for the last 13 centuries? Only God knows the answer to that last question as to why it is happening now, but we do know that thousands and thousands of Muslims are having visions and dreams of Jesus, a being shining as bright as the sun, just like Binta saw. God is visiting these Muslims through dreams, visions, and answered prayer in the name of Jesus.

It is interesting that Muhammad endorsed the value of dreams in his own life, which is prompting Muslims worldwide to give credence to dreams. Garrison tells the story of one colleague who met a Muslim man who had experienced such a dream. The colleague opened his Bible and had the man read from Matthew 17 where it says: "After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light." Startled by this account from the New Testament, the Muslim man responded, "That's the guy, the guy in my dreams! Who is this?"

So we come back to the question, how does God communicate with us? Is it primarily through dreams and visions, like Peter and Binta and all these thousands of Muslims, or through angels like with Cornelius? In the first place remember, Peter and Cornelius did not have a Bible. The New Testament hadn't been written. And most if not all of these Muslims would not have had access to a Bible either. Many of them live in cultures that are far closer to ancient times where evil spirits and dreams were part of everyday life, than we are in the secularized Western world.

Theologians talk about general revelation and special revelation. Revelation means to reveal, like opening a curtain or opening a package to reveal what is inside. General revelation and special revelation deal with the question, how does God reveal himself to us?

General revelation describes the way God reveals himself to every person in the world. The most obvious way is through the wonder of creation. Every time we see a sunset or a beautiful flower or a bird in flight or look at the human hand, how amazing it is, or look through a microscope at the amazing complexity of a cell or look at pictures from the Hubble telescope of galaxies billions of light years away, we see the hand of God. All that amazing creation could not have happened by chance. Did you know that astronomers now tell us, with the evidence from the Hubble telescope, that the number of stars in the universe is equal to the total number of grains of sand on every beach and every desert in the whole world? God's creation is absolutely mind boggling.

One of the wonderful things about Boy Scouts is being able to get out in the forests and the mountains to appreciate the wonders of God's creation. One of my most vivid memories of Boy Scout days was a hike we took with Andy Nelson up to the Goat Rocks and lying in our sleeping bags on a beautiful clear night in Snow Grass Flats, looking up at the jillions of stars. Suddenly we started seeing shooting stars, one right after another. It was very exciting. Later we learned it was the famous Perseid meteor shower which shows up every August. It was amazing.

Martin Luther said, "All people have the general knowledge that God is, that he created heaven and earth, that he is just, and that he punishes the wicked." St. Augustine said, "Humans have a God-sized vacuum in their heart, so big, that only God can fill it." The Apostle Paul wrote, "for since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen" (Rom 1:20). That's general revelation.

Then we have what's called special revelation. In the book of Hebrews in the New Testament we read this: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."

And how do we know about the Son whom God the Father has used to speak to us? Through the Bible. The Old Testament points to the coming of the Messiah, and in the New Testament we have 4 biographies of Jesus Christ the Son of God, and the rest of the New Testament tells us about the early believers and what they learned and experienced as followers and disciples of the Son of God.

The Bible clearly describes our predicament. We are finite creatures, but we have an eternal destiny. We are made for fellowship with God, but we are separated from God by our sin. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot get to heaven by our good deeds. But the Bible spells out the good news of the gospel. A

holy and merciful God promises salvation and forgiveness of our sin through the gift of his Son. Jesus bore our sins on the cross, dying in our place and rising again so that we might have the hope and promise of life eternal.

That's special revelation. The most well-known verse in the New Testament sums it up, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

That was the good news that Peter shared with all the people gathered at Cornelius' house. You can read the rest of the story in chapter 10. Peter took 6 Jewish Christians with him and they went with those 3 Gentile men who had come to get him, the 30 miles north to Caesarea. There they found a large gathering who had heard Cornelius tell the story of the angel appearing to him, and they had gathered with anticipation to hear what this Jewish man might have to say. Peter didn't disappoint them. He told them about Jesus, who was killed by fellow Jews, hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead. He said that God has appointed Jesus as judge of the living and the dead, and that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

That's the message God wants us to hear. That's the message God wants to communicate to us through his Word, the Bible.

Now what about all those thousands of Muslims who have had dreams of Jesus with a face as bright as the sun? Most or perhaps all of them had no access to the Bible. The dreams are only the instrument that God is using to get their attention. The first thing they do is to find a Bible. You remember that is what Binta did even before she went to a church for the first time. In his book, Dr. Garrison says, "if he has not already read it, the first thing a new Muslim-background believer wants to do is read the Bible for himself, or if he cannot read, he often learns to read for that purpose." He describes how a number of these movements came on the heels of new Bible translations into their local language, or how the *JESUS Film* (which is the Gospel of Luke in video format) quickly fueled indigenous movements to Christ. Muslims honor holy books.

Dr. Garrison says that many Muslims began their pilgrimage to Christ with a clear reading, for the first time, of the Qur'an in their own language. For centuries, Muslims have had to accept, and often memorize, the Qur'an in Arabic—the language of Allah. The fact that they did not understand it only enhanced its mystique and the hold it held over them. Now that many are able to read it in their own language, the illusion has been shattered.

For the Qur'an offers no assurance of salvation. For assurance of salvation, one must turn to the person and work of Jesus Christ. As one Muslim-background evangelist put it, "Only after I read the Qur'an in my own language, did I realize how lost I was."

So what about dreams and visions? Does God still communicate with us that way? I've talked to several of you this week who have experienced dreams where you felt God was speaking to you. But there is one very important principal to always remember. God will never speak to you in a dream in some way that contradicts his Word, the Bible. The Bible is the gold standard by which everything has to be measured, and nothing coming from God will ever go against his Word.

It is hard sometimes to separate our own desires and will from God's will and desires. It is too easy sometimes to say, this is what God wants me to do, when really it is what we want to do and we've rationalized that it was God who told us this.

There is a great danger in putting trust in dreams and visions or inner voices. We live in an age where many people are saying, direct experience is always more trustworthy. Many are saying, I have my own personal experience and relationship with God. Why would I need to be part of a church? Why would I need bread and wine? Why would I need to gather with other believers to worship God? Why would I need to be part of a Bible study or even read the Bible?

Wade Clark Roof, a sociologist of religion, conducted a series of studies and he reports, "The distinction between spirit and institution is of major importance to spiritual seekers today. "Spirit," he says, "is the inner experiential aspect of religion. Institution is the outward established form of religion." In other words, we're in the age of the spirit, where the institution, the church, its word and its sacraments are for many irrelevant. They don't need them. They have this direct, immediate, internal relationship with God.

Perhaps that is what many people mean when they say, "I'm spiritual, but not religious."

The Christian faith is based on fact, not feeling. The inward experience of the presence of God is important, but feelings come and go, and you cannot always rely on them. Those of you who have been married for a while know that the feeling of being in love comes and goes. Marriage is not based on feeling, it is based on fact, that you made a commitment to be loving and faithful to your spouse no matter what, whether you feel in love at the moment or not.

Our faith in God is not just based on feeling or inward experience. It is based on fact, on the truth of the Bible. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." The Spirit is important of course. It is the Holy Spirit that makes the Bible come alive when we read it. That's how God communicates with us. It is the Holy Spirit who is present when we gather together with the Body of Christ to worship. That's how God communicates with us. And it is the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, that still small voice, that is the voice of God speaking to us. In John 15 and 16, Jesus called the Holy Spirit the Spirit of truth who testifies to the truth of the

gospel, who confirms to us the truth that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and who guides us into all truth.

The important thing to know is that God loves you. He wants to communicate with you. He knows your name, just like the Cornelius and Peter were called by name. He knows more about you than you even know yourself. In Matthew 10:30 Jesus said that even the hairs on your head are all numbered. God wants a relationship with each one of us, but it is sin that creates a barrier, and when we have accepted Christ as our Savior, our sins are forgiven, and the barrier comes down. What a joy to be known by God, to have the hope and confidence that gives us, and to know that he wants the very best for our lives.