

The God who is Embodied

Sermon by John Strommen on I John 4:1-6 July 8, 2018

Today we are urged by the writer of I John not to trust every spirit that comes our way, but to “test the spirits”, to see whether it is of God or not.

Do you fee equipped to test the spirits? To see whether something is *of God* or not? This basically means discerning what is the will of God and what is not. I don't know about you, but any time someone claims to understand what God wants, the skeptic in me rises from its chair. Particularly when God's will seems to include some incredible windfall for the one professing it. Like when God's will includes a lear jet for the preacher who is trying to raise money.

The truth is, our post-Christian world for the last 50 years has become increasingly skeptical of the whole idea that God talks to people and has plans for anyone's life. This is usually because compromised people have used God to justify their own designs on things. Manifest destiny, the doctrine that God wanted European Christians to take the land away from Native Americans is another such example. Gee, God's will can be pretty convenient for us, can't it?

And yet, I John *insists* that there are false spirits and we must listen for the true spirit, the voice of God. Again, what makes us think we can listen to the actual voice of God or sense the presence of God? And even if we can, how can we tell which spirit is which?

The answer to both questions is the same, and it is John's point: we can listen to God Because God became a human being in Jesus. God did this so that God could have a relationship with us, so that God could communicate with us in terms we could understand. Shouldn't we then expect that God is talking to us?

And how can we tell who is speaking, God or some other spirit? Same answer. We can tell who is speaking because God became a human being in Jesus. The spirit who affirms Jesus of Nazareth is the real one. Why? Because the kind of existence we call “human” was deemed worthy of saving by God, so God chose to embrace that kind of existence; so that human beings, living their lives in their human bodies, could be saved.

Our faith is centered on an embodied Word. In Jesus, God has revealed who God is. You want to know what God is like, what God wants for us? Look at Jesus. This is why it's so important to know the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. That is how you test the spirits.

One of the spiritual practices we need to cultivate in our faith community at Mt Carmel is “discernment” – discerning what God's will might be for you and us. Discernment is not an exact science, of course. We get it wrong a lot. But learning about what God did in the flesh, in Jesus, will tell you a lot about what God is trying to do with and through you right now. So, that is number 1. Learn what is in the Word, starting with the Gospels, which tell us about Jesus. This is where one begins in testing the spirits! This is why Bible studies and courses like GPS are important. As someone said in the GPS course, “when my grandchild asked me why we do baptisms in the church, I didn't have an answer.” Many don't feel

equipped to answer that question. By learning God's Word together, we can come to understand that only when we are reborn into the body of Jesus Christ, a new creation born of flesh and blood, are we saved. This rebirth is signified by baptism.

This is also why dwelling in the Word is important, learning to listen for God's voice in Jesus. Jesus is the living Word, and we can hear God's living Word speak in the pages of the Bible. So, first of all, it is important to learn about Jesus, who Jesus is, how Jesus speaks. One of the delights of dwelling in the Word together is that often we hear God speaking through what someone else heard, which brings me to the second point.

Second, as we try to understand what that means for us in our lives right now, we listen to God's word in each other, in our embodied selves. Christ, you see, lives in us now. This is why it is said that the church of the 21st century will be born out of conversation: members of the body of Christ talking with one another about what God's will is for them. This word is embodied in each other. This is why Christian fellowship is so important. It's why Jesus said, "Where two or more are gathered, there I am in the midst of them."

It's why Luther said, "the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints" - you and me and our neighbor - was vital to Christian community. God shows up in each other in Christian fellowship.

For instance, it was curious when no one from the apartment building next to my former church in Plymouth ever came over to our church. Parkside Apartments were and are a big apartment complex, too. But it wasn't until a group formed at Mt Olivet that was dedicated to asking questions, having conversations about what God is calling us to do in the neighborhood that we discovered what God had in mind for us. You see, as we asked the question "why don't they walk over here to our church?" we stumbled upon the answer through a demographic survey and also by asking some of them! We found that those apartments were transitional, and cheaper than most apartments in Plymouth. Many residents were single parent families, or working class folks, and they perceived themselves to be of a different socio-economic class than the average Mt Olivet member. In short, they were intimidated to walk over.

So, this Mt Olivet group, after dwelling in the word and praying together, discerned what God wanted them to do: try to plan some gatherings outside of a worship service where we could get to know them, where the intimidation factor wouldn't be as strong. So, with a few failures along the way, they tried some things: a BBQ, sharing a community garden with them, raising money for them when there was a fire that damaged one of the buildings. It also involved events where Parkside hosted some events where *we were invited*. Through all of this, we made some friends over there. Some of them even came over to worship, but that wasn't the main point. It was the relationships. Respecting our neighbors for where they were at, so to speak.

And none of this would have happened without talking and wondering and letting God show up in each other and speak! So, our God speaks through each other.

Third, we discern what God is up to by listening to our neighbors, to the world. Why so? Because God made it clear that in Jesus, in his body, God was identifying with the poor, the marginalized, and all who are broken. You know where those people are? All around us. I just had coffee with the former bishop of the ELCA who happens to be married to my cousin. Mark told me about being bishop in St Paul and asking all his committees at the synod to suspend their normal agendas for one year and embark on a listening campaign. So they had questions to ask of their neighbors about who they were, what mattered to them, how the church might be helpful partners. Through all this, the St Paul synod in the 90's discerned a vision that came out of their conversations with their neighbors.

All three of these ways of listening to God's voice have one thing in common: we are embodied and listening to God's voice that is embodied, in Jesus, in each other, in our neighbors.

Fourth, and finally, we listen to God's voice that is intertwined and enmeshed in our own bodies, in our own stories. In the spring, 22 of you took part in the GPS course that was offered here, and the whole point of that course was learning to listen together to what God's direction is for our lives. Part of our discovery was that the gifts we have been given in our human existence are clues, conversation starters between God and each of us about what God is up to in our lives. We learned that this God speaks to us and is at work in our life stories, the places we live our lives, the passions that course through our veins, the abilities that come naturally to bodies, brains and temperaments. The point is: God shows up in you!

So, when people around us say that "well, I'm a spiritual person," or that "all religions, all roads lead to God," and then we assume that this is God talking, well, John would caution us here. This is the reason why: what we confess on Sunday mornings in the Apostle's Creed and other confessions have nothing to do with finding roads to God. What we believe is that God found a road to us and it ended in the body and blood of Jesus. The spirit that comes from God that we believe in showed up in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is embodied – in Jesus, and now, in us.

Our faith and our beliefs are all about learning to listen to the God who come to us *as one of us* so that we do not need to find a road to God. God found a road to us. That road appears in God's Living Word, Jesus, and when two or more are gathered. In our neighbors in whom God is present. And in you. So, pay attention. Amen.