

Conversation with God

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One of the more famous works of Christian art is the Rublev Trinity. It was painted by a Russian Orthodox monk for his monastery church sometime around the year 1400 – six hundred years ago. Icons are paintings depicting Biblical persons, events, and saints which decorate Orthodox churches, particularly, they are placed on a screen that shields the altar from public view, an iconostasis. The painting of icons follows a strict formula and the act of painting is a form of devotion. Icons are used to draw us into a deep state of worship. They are spiritual guides.

The Rublev Trinity is a depiction of Abraham's three surprise guests when he was camped by the oaks of Mamre. While the Christian community quickly incorporated the Jewish sacred scriptures without modification as part of the Christian Bible, from early times, the church read the Jewish scriptures as the foreshadowing of the coming of Christ. This way of reading our Old Testament sometimes was simple and straight forward and sometimes required rather tortured interpretation. In the case of the story of the visitation of Abraham at the oaks of Mamre, these visitors were seen by Christians as avatars, or holograms, or simply a vision of the Trinitarian God. This is what the monk Andrei Rublev was seeking to depict in his icon.

Rublev wasn't the only artist inspired by the stories of Abraham. There are scores of icons, paintings and mosaics adorning church walls depicting this and other scenes from this saga. Abraham is a seminal character for Jews, Christians and Moslems both literally and figuratively. All three faiths are referred to as the Abrahamic faiths. For a period of weeks now our Old Testament readings skip

through the life of Abraham, Sarah and their descendants. The saga of Abraham and Sarah and their son Isaac and grandsons Jacob and Esau and the twelve sons of Jacob who fathered the twelve tribes of Israel, is alone an epic tale stretching over 39 chapters of the Book of Genesis. It is one of only three extended biographic tales in the Hebrew Bible, matched only by the stories of Moses and, later, King David. Scholars surmise that this story in Genesis is likely a conflation of many oral traditions, stories handed down while sitting by an evening fire in multiple separate communities which explains the diversity of themes and terminology.

As we read this unfolding tale of Abraham and Sarah, the constant element, the thread and runs through the whole saga is that it is all about these characters in conversation with God. There is a constant active dialogue. God is ever present and ever communicating. Abraham appears to be always listening, hearing, responding, sometimes arguing, and usually, but not always, obedient to what he hears God telling him. Abraham trusts the voice of God.

This saga of a boy from the city of Ur in present day southern Iraq, who wanders across the land to Palestine, grows wealthy with flocks and herds, has children and finally dies, we are told, at the age of 175 – this saga confronts us today with the question of how was it that Abraham was in such regular conversation with God and we have such a difficult struggle to hear God’s voice. When I was a child, I just thought that four thousand years ago God was more engaged with humans, at least with those mentioned in our Bible. I thought that God would chat them up back then but had stopped doing that. When I heard that the Pope would claim to be speaking for God, I snorted in disbelief thinking that doesn’t really happen these days.

How can we recapture this immediacy, this nearly tactile intimacy? How can we enter this sacramental relationship? Abraham seemed to just step out through the doorway of his tent and there was God ready to talk. In contrast, I have encountered many who claim they pray their hearts out asking God for direction in making difficult decisions in their life and can't detect any response. Well, I do have some thoughts on how to be in conversation with God.

We often behave as if to pray means that we have to talk. It is all yak, yak, yak, on our side and silence on the other. There is so much noise, both in our heads and in our environment, we cannot hear even if God were to speak to us in an audible voice in English. We ignore that prayer in our Prayer Book that acknowledges that God knows what we need before we ask. We ignore that God knows our secrets, our fears and our hopes. There is no putting a spin on our petitions. The raw elemental truth is the only currency that God exchanges. God converses with what is in the center of our hearts.

An important place to begin our conversations with God is to find a quiet place where we cannot be disturbed and begin to listen. In the various practices of what is called Centering Prayer, or Contemplative Prayer, or meditation, people engage silence, both interior and exterior. It is not easy. It is always a struggle to shut down the monkeys in our heads.

Listening happens with our whole body, not just our ears. God can communicate with us through our whole being, from our gut to our heart to our head. We can know things in our bones and muscles and skin. And not just in our physical bodies, but also, as in Biblical times, today we can receive understanding through our dreams.

Listening is not just an interior activity. We can listen to our natural environment, our physical context. Why do you think it is that we find such deep refreshment from walking in the woods, standing on a sea cliff, watching birds and other creatures in their daily habits. Abraham had a distinct advantage in this regard. He resided in a tent. There was no electricity, no TV, no telephone, not even a newspaper. Day and night he was very present to the natural elements and they shaped his work and his understanding. The night sky was brilliant with constantly rotating stars and planets. Wind and rain and heat and cold were his companions. Today, we do have to struggle to connect with our natural environment. We live in just a tightly sealed and protected environment.

Listening to God also includes our social environment. God can speak to us through family, friends and our wider community. Sometimes a stranger may open your eyes to some truth and you think that you have been visited by an angel. Years back I served on the Diocesan Commission on Ministry. Our primary task was to assist the Bishop in discerning whether we recognized a call to ordained ministry in persons who came before us. Individuals who sensed a call to become priests or deacons came to us to first explore their calling and if the Bishop approved that they move forward as postulants, we then oversaw their formation through seminary and other learning processes that would equip them to become successful clergy persons. Key among our topics of inquiry was how they were perceived by others – their church community, friends and others who knew them well. Could others see that God was calling them. In listening for God, it can be very helpful if not determinative that it is God who is talking if others also hear this voice.

There is a passage in Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamozov*, where one of the brothers is cautioning, if you sitting in the very palm of God's hand, always know that you might be wrong. This may seem overly cynical but is wise advice. At the least, it instills humility. How can we know it is God speaking to us? I suggest that we always pause, a holy pause. God is not going to slam the door shut. There is not a small window of opportunity. God is drawing us into a blessed life, into fulfillment of our complete humanity. There is no expiration date on call, so pause. Maybe just waiting a bit and confirm that the message has not gone away. Maybe it will be helpful to seek affirmation from people who know and love you? Finally, ask if what you believe that God is saying to you will hurt or harm others. Ask if what you are being called to do can be a blessing to those who will be affected.

This church is a place to listen for God's side of our conversations. In our music, in our common prayers, in our opening of scripture, and in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, God speaks to us as individuals and as a community of faith. When Andrei Rublev was inspired to paint his icon, he was in conversation with God as real as any dialogue between Abraham and God. We can be in conversation as well. Be still, wait, listen, pause, then act. Do not be afraid. Wherever we are in our span of life, God is calling us into our joy.