



Speaking Lessons

By

The Reverend Dr. John M. Willingham

From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

August 23, 2026

First Lesson | Numbers 12:1-9

While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman), and they said, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the Lord heard it. Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth. Suddenly the Lord said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.” So the three of them came out. Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam, and they both came forward. And he said, “Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the Lord. “Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them, and he departed.

Second Lesson | Mark 1:9-11

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”



Sermon

This sermon marks the third time this summer that my primary preaching text has come from the book of Numbers. Given that I have only preached five times in eleven weeks that is an unusually high percentage that would have been greater had I not used the Exodus version of the manna from heaven story in a June sermon instead of the parallel account found in Numbers.

Such frequency might cause some to wonder if the fourth book of the Bible is a personal favorite. That isn't the case. Instead, my reasoning for a focus on chapters 10-12 in Numbers, the sections that we have pondered together, is due to how they describe a time when the

Israelites were on a journey toward an unknown future. This congregation is experiencing such a transition as well, not geographic, of course, but from one pastorate toward the next one. Thus, the Biblical narrative has run parallel to our ecclesiastical life even if the message on a given Sunday did not make that tie explicit.

Today's sermon builds on another recent pattern. Worship this summer has offered only the latest evidence of how each of your Associate Pastors, in addition to their other gifts, is a skillful preacher. Like you, I have been blessed by their faithful words whether physically present in the room or watching online. Yet for the last two weeks, the sermon has focused on trouble between Joseph and his brothers. Coincidentally, today's reading from Numbers tells of a struggle between siblings, too.

As we have recalled this summer, the journey for the Israelites was not carefree or one marked by unending joy as their time of enslavement faded into memory. Instead, one of the consistent themes in those texts has been that of grumbling. It first came with the people complaining about the lack of food. God responded

with manna. Later, they began to gripe about the lack of variety in their diet and a desire for meat. Our Creator sent quail. Weeks ago, we recalled the day Moses cried out to God that the weight of leading the Israelites was wearing him out, and the Lord responded with elders to share the burden. In a scene we did not read, Moses' second-in-command, Joshua, complained when two men who had not been part of the earlier ordination service acted as authorized prophets even so. In our text, the discontent comes from a new direction: Moses's siblings.

His older brother Aaron had been by Moses' side since the burning bush. That was the moment God told Moses he was to go to Pharaoh and secure the people's freedom. As the divine one continued to explain that work, Moses offered a succession of empty excuses as to why he was not the man for the job. Finally, God agreed to send Aaron to be Moses' spokesperson. Initially, both brothers did go to Pharaoh and speak with one voice, yet soon Moses grew more confident in his role and became the primary one to address not only the Egyptian ruler, but his fellow Israelites, too.

Moses' sister Miriam is described elsewhere in Scripture as a prophet, the only person other than Abraham given that title in the Pentateuch. While we don't know for sure, Miriam is generally understood to be the unnamed older sister of Moses who looked out for her infant brother when he was placed in the bulrushes and eventually taken into Pharaoh's home. The first time she is referred to by name in Scripture comes after the events at the Red Sea when she sings words of celebration. The Song of Miriam is universally recognized by Biblical scholars as one of the oldest pieces of Hebrew poetry. Our passage recalls the next time she is identified by name.

While encamped at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron begin to complain about their brother. The author of our text tries to soften it a bit, suggesting the basis for their words is disapproval of Moses' choice in a spouse, but that explanation rings hollow when they voice their grievance. "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?" they ask. "Has he not spoken through us also?" We don't know where they are when they make that complaint. Perhaps it was after dinner one night or while walking along when,

for the millionth time, someone told them how wonderful their baby brother was. We don't know if this is the only time they had voiced that sentiment either, but God hears the complaint and responds.

Years ago, I was talking with a woman named Jennifer, the mother of two teenage sons. I don't remember the boys' names, so let's call them Bill and Bob. Our conversation occurred shortly after the birth of our daughter. After congratulating us on that event, Jennifer went on to speak of how different life would be for Lori and me with a second child.

As an example, she recalled a day when their younger son had asked his parents if he could do something with friends. They said "no." He replied, "You would let Bill do it. You love him more than me!" An hour later, their older son asked permission to go somewhere, too, and his parents again declined. He was completely unaware of the recent conversation between his brother and their parents, as he said. "I can't believe it. You let Bob do that kind of thing all the time. You clearly love him more than me!" At that word, Jennifer took Bill by the

hand to Bob's room. With both children present, she looked at one and said, "You say we love your brother more than you." She turned to Bill and said, "You just told us that we love him more than you. Both can't be true. Now which one is it?" The boys laughed at themselves and probably decided that the next time, they would try a different tactic!

When God heard the complaint of Aaron and Miriam, there was a direct reaction, too, as he ordered the three siblings — including Moses — to gather at the tent of meeting. Once there, God upbraids the older brother and sister. "When there are prophets among you," God says, "I, the LORD, make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face — clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant?" God departs. There are residual effects as the next scene speaks of Miriam becoming leprous for seven days, but otherwise the storm passes.

While that moment arose after a fit of sibling rivalry, there is an enduring message for all who have learned of it

since — whether an only child or the baby of the family, the eldest or middle child — as it offers a word about how God communicates with human beings still.

Sometimes, I suspect persons can wonder if, in the past, God chatted directly with people on a regular basis. That in the olden days if a person wanted to speak with God, she or he needed only to start the conversation, and God would always answer quickly and audibly. It's understandable if one has that perception, as in addition to today's reading and other occasions when God is speaking with Moses, the Old Testament records times when God's words are recorded from conversations with Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Elijah and Samuel, and others. Our reading from Mark's gospel recalls one of two times when God is recorded as speaking aloud — at his son's baptism. The other occurs at Jesus' transfiguration. To read of such moments from the past might make us wonder what has changed.

That's one of the helpful pieces from this reading in Numbers, as it reveals how even in ancient days there was not a uniform pattern of divine

communication. God tells Miriam and Aaron that with Moses, yes, the speaking is clear, face to face. Yet for all others, even for prophets, the conversation occurred mostly via visions or dreams or riddles. God still spoke, but it took more work for humans to understand; a communication pattern which likely is more the norm for us as well.

As I have never heard God speak audibly. Perhaps you have been blessed in that way, but I would guess that far more often God speaks in other ways to you as well. That the communication still happens, that there are still messages from God, but it is usually not so direct and audible.

Some of you might recall the news story a year ago about a woman named Chastity Patterson. For four years that Arkansas woman grieved the death of Jason Ligon, a man she called Dad. After his passing, she started to text his phone every day to update him about her life. While she certainly did not expect a reply, the messages were a way of dealing with her grief. On October 25, 2019, she told him of how she had beaten cancer and fallen in love, only to have her heart broken. In reply, she received a response from a

man named Brad who had been getting her daily updates for some length of time. Unbeknownst to Chastity, the phone company had reissued Ligon's number shortly after his death.

"I am not your father," Brad wrote, "but I have been getting all of your messages for the past four years... I look forward to your morning messages and your nightly updates... I lost my daughter in a car wreck in August 2014, and your messages have kept me alive. When you text me," he went on, "I know it's a message from God... I'm sorry you have to go through this, but if it makes it any better, I am very proud of you." Chastity posted the exchange on Facebook and added: "Today was my sign that everything is okay and I can let Dad rest." Her post was shared 300,000 times and picked up by several media outlets many of which added headlines implying Ligon had replied from beyond the grave. Most national news organizations, though, ignored the story since there was no miracle involved. A classroom resource I used at the time to connect current events to faith had a different perspective.

"We think both approaches missed the

real story,” wrote the editors of The Wired Word. “The major news agencies do have it right, that there was no miracle...but the story invites us to think about how God does work in our lives. Certainly, he’s not limited to interventions that cannot be explained by science. He can work through things we might label as coincidence or accident or serendipity or luck or natural process or everyday happenings.

“Or maybe a miracle did occur. While there was no obvious supernatural intervention that overrode the laws of nature... something did occur that was not ordinary, not usual and not something that one would normally expect to happen... Perhaps God did not provide an exception to Newton’s (or Einstein’s) laws of motion, but he may well have moved the thoughts of Patterson and Brad toward the mutual support and benefit that occurred.

Both... were quick to see God’s fingerprints in their exchange. Skeptics might disagree, but some things take the eyes of faith to discern.” (The Wired Word, 11/7/19)

How does God speak today? The Bible is clear that God used dreams and visions

and human intermediaries in the past to communicate with human beings, and there’s no reason to conclude such patterns are not still utilized by our Maker. Yet I believe that God also speaks in those moments when we think about someone we haven’t heard from in years and choose to follow up, discovering that something of note has just happened to them. God speaks when a teenager stands in this pulpit on Youth Sunday and delivers a heartfelt sermon, or when a child cuts through all the complications of life and, with a single question, helps us see things clearly. God speaks when our prayers are not answered as we want and when a friend keeps encouraging us to try something new, or when a stranger says something we needed to hear without knowing the gift it would be. And yes, to answer the question from Miriam and Aaron long ago, God can and does speak on occasion through you and me.

Perhaps God chooses unique means to communicate with humans that best fit the unique individuals who are receiving the message, and for us, the ideal way is not always aloud. Even if other people, including our baby brother, get to hear the words face to face.

