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**Isaiah 30:19–21 ESV**, abbreviated

*<sup>19</sup> For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you. <sup>20</sup> And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. <sup>21</sup> And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it.”*

**Isaiah 66:4 ESV**

*<sup>4</sup> I also will choose harsh treatment for them  
and bring their fears upon them,  
because when I called, no one answered,  
when I spoke, they did not listen;  
but they did what was evil in my eyes  
and chose that in which I did not delight.”*

**1 John 10:23–28 ESV**, abbreviated.

*<sup>23</sup> Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. <sup>24</sup> So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” <sup>25</sup> Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, <sup>26</sup> but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. <sup>27</sup> My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup> I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*

## **God is screaming at me.**

About a year ago, I was talking to a man in the Behavioral Health unit. He was somewhat younger than me, around fifty years-old, and had recently been moved from an ICU to the Behavioral Health Unit. He had attempted suicide and had been brought into the ER by police and EMTs. We'll call him Eddie. He had deliberately overdosed on pills of some sort - and he came very close to succeeding. They had had to restart Eddie's heart in the ER. He had been unconscious and intubated – that is, he had a breathing tube down his throat – for a full week. (As always, I'm changing details of this story, to protect this person's privacy.). Other chaplains spent time with Eddie when he was in the ICU, but I didn't see him until he had recovered from his overdose and was in Behavioral Health. He was very kind to me, very polite, and quite excited when he found out that I am an ordained reverend. I realized immediately that Eddie was also cognitively disabled, and one of the first things he told me was that until recently, he had had a job cleaning up in a warehouse. He also told me what had led up to his suicide attempt. He said that he had heard God talking to him, but that he hadn't wanted to listen. He said that God talked to him at work, telling him that God had a special mission for him, but that he ignored God. But God wouldn't stop talking to him, and Eddie found it hard to focus and get his work

done. And the important mission that God had planned for him? He never listened long enough to find out what it was. Maybe he should have, Eddie said, but he didn't listen. Finally, one day, he just got up and left his job, a good job that he had liked, and walked out without giving notice, because he was too distracted to work. But of course, God followed him wherever he went, and talked to him louder and louder, more and more frequently, and in fact, God started screaming at him, again telling him that he was going to have to do what God wanted him to do. I am not a medical professional and I avoid asking any questions that could make it seem like I'm psychoanalyzing someone. I am an attentive, affirming, patient listener, and I ask simple questions aimed at keeping someone talking and allowing them to tell their story. But with Eddie, I couldn't help but ask him if God spoke in a real, audible voice, one that he could actually hear with his ears. He laughed and said of course not. He said that God spoke inside his head, that the words were real, but that they were planted in his mind. They did not enter his brain through his ears. He told me that when he decided that he couldn't get away from God's voice, when he couldn't think or walk or eat because of God annoying him all the time, he swallowed all the pills he had. I asked why he didn't just listen to God instead, to see what his special mission

was. Eddie said he would tell me, but that he needed to know something from me. I'll tell you his answer to my question, as well as what he asked of me.

But first, let's look at our first quote: *And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it."* This is from Isaiah, Chapter 30. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah contain prophecies of the prophet Isaiah. Remember that the prophets spoke for God, warning the Israelites when they were drifting away from their God and promising them God's love and protection when they followed the laws of their Lord. Isaiah lived in the southern part of Israel, which included Jerusalem. He was active between 742 and 687 B.C. At the time, the southern part of Israel was under the domination of Assyria, which was to the northeast. In our passage, Isaiah describes the coming of salvation - freedom from the Assyrians. If God's people call out to God, they will be protected. All they must do is listen to the words of God - by turning against the idolatry of the Assyrian invaders. We note that God isn't delivering a new message here. We don't have to nervously pay attention to God every second, concerned that we're going to miss a command to suddenly live in a very different way.

Our second passage is from later in Isaiah. *I also will choose harsh treatment for them and bring their fears upon them, because when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, they did not listen; but they did what was evil in my*

*eyes and chose that in which I did not delight.* It tells us what happens to those who do not listen when God speaks. Chapter 66 is the last chapter of this long Bible book. In it, the prophet tells us what will happen to those who try to replace God's agenda with the agenda of people, to those who prize the things of this world more than the things of God's world.

In our third passage, we are in the Gospel of John, at the time of the annual Feast of the Dedication, in which Jews celebrated the cleansing and restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem after it had been desecrated by the Syrians. In our passage, Jesus is telling us that he is in a sense replacing the Temple as the true home of God. However, Christians do not focus on buildings as the source of the presence of God. As Christians, we do hold this church, this building around us, as a very special place. But God is everywhere, God is within us, and, in particular, God comes to us, not through the church building, but through Jesus. And so, when Jesus says: <sup>27</sup>*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.* <sup>28</sup>*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand,* well, we know we must listen.

Let's step through the logic of our three passages. With respect to our first quote, we do need to listen to God, to get our direction from God and not humans. God's message to us is simple and consistent, and it is loving. We must

accept God as our creator and our lifelong guide. Our second quote tells us is that we can expect bad things to happen when we deliberately walk down the wrong path. But God isn't cruel or vengeful. It's simply true that we'll get lost and make mistakes if we try to find our path on our own. Finally, as Christians today, we have an easy way to follow God's path. We just walk in the footsteps of Jesus. We forgive, we feed the hungry, and we care for others. We always admit our faults, seek forgiveness and regeneration, and then we become whole again.

So, what about my guy who tried to kill himself because he was tired of God screaming at him? First of all, Eddie was an innocent person. He was cognitively disabled, as well as mentally ill, and yes, these are two different things. He wasn't responsible for harming himself. What about that question he had for me? He asked me if his soul was okay, if by trying to kill himself he was going to be condemned by God. I told him absolutely not, that at the point he tried to kill himself, he wasn't in control of his actions. He didn't even need forgiveness. And, I added, Eddie was clearly a deeply good man.

Then I told him that since I had answered his question, he had to answer mine. I said it with a smile, and then I added that actually, if he didn't want to, he didn't have to answer. But Eddie said oh, I'll tell you, when God was screaming in my ear so loudly that I couldn't think or work or eat, why I didn't just stop and

listen to God. He said it was because he was scared at actually hearing the voice of God, or rather at hearing it in his brain. He said he knew that he was different than other people, and he was afraid that it wasn't really the voice of God, that it was the voice of craziness. Eddie told me that he knew that he wasn't a "useful" person, and that was the word he used – useful. He said that God wouldn't really take the time to talk to a nobody. I told him that I hear the voice of God, that it has been growing louder and louder as I've gotten older, and I'm not crazy. He asked me what God said to me and how God said it. Did the words appear in my brain, like they did for him? I said no, that I hear the voice of God by having things happen in my life that force me to make a decision.

In my life, God has confronted me with decision points. It happens when a chapter in my life is coming to an end. A big one was when Wendy and I realized that we could afford for me to retire early, and when I decided that although I had enjoyed being a professor, it was time to step away from academic politics and the high pressure of constantly working to bring in research dollars. I had thought many times over the years that I would like to go to a seminary and become a reverend and be the pastor of a church. But I had misgivings. It would cost money to attend a seminary. It would take three years and be a lot of work. I put off the idea of retiring and going to the seminary. Then, the morning after I came

to this conclusion, I opened my Bible, as I often do, without having anything specific in mind to read. I wasn't looking for any direction in making my decision.

I had already made my mind up. Want to know what my eyes fell on first?

Matthew 6:24: <sup>24</sup> *"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.* A few days later, Wendy and I visited Iliff together, and even before we got there, I knew I would register full time.

I told Eddie not to be afraid of the voice of God and that God would never want him to harm himself or anyone else. My hunch, I told him, was that God was trying to say that he is greatly loved and valued by God, that his life has meaning. I told him that every single person created by God is important, and that Jesus himself showed great respect for and spent a lot of time with people who were regarded by the world as not having any value. I said that he was especially loved by God and by Jesus.

God does speak to us. He speaks to us in different ways. Some people simply find a conviction growing within them. Some people have a strong moral compass and they find themselves constantly thinking about the right thing to do. Others stop when something bad happens to them and they wonder: is this a message from God? Many people deliberately open the Bible randomly and put



their finger on a passage, knowing that God will speak to them this way. Some folks feel so blessed that they sense God telling them that a great debt has built up and they must find a way to pay it forward. I don't know how God may speak to you. But try to listen. God will speak to you, I promise. We tend to get ground down by our society. The media makes us believe that only a small handful of wealthy people, powerful people, gifted athletes, rich actors and musicians, that these are the only people that hold any true value. We don't even seem to value scientists and engineers who build all the things we depend upon. When we leave here today, remember that God values you and wants you to live in joy. And you will find God speaking to you when you need guidance. You just have to listen. Please pray with me.

*God, thank you for living alongside us, for guiding us as we proceed through this temporary life. Please help us find that special way that you speak to each of us. Let us hear you, understand you, and live out your will. And God, we understand that often, your message to us is to simply live like Jesus did. Most of all God, when society wants us to live only vicariously, by envying the lives of famous, wealthy, and powerful people, do not let us forget that Jesus himself didn't care about those people much at all. Jesus, whose birth we are soon going to celebrate, cared for those who gave, not those who took. Amen.*