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Davey, Alan and Elizabeth Davey. *Abba's Whisper: Listening for the Voice of God*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2017.

Abba's Whisper

Listening for the Voice of God

ALAN DAVEY AND ELIZABETH DAVEY

Foreword by Brian C. Stiller

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

ABBA'S WHISPER

Listening for the Voice of God

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Wipf & Stock

An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3

Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-4982-3684-3

HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-4982-3686-7

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-4982-3685-0

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

JANUARY 10, 2017

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Introduction

Whisper in My Heart

IN C. S. LEWIS'S children's story *The Magician's Nephew*, there is a moving scene of the great lion Aslan beginning his acts of creation, singing the new world of Narnia into existence. A cluster of disparate figures are present in the empty world watching the connection between light, hills, trees, animals emerging, and sounds coming from the lion's voice. The London cabbie and the children Jill and Digory are spellbound, silently drinking in the magnificent event. Jadis, the witch from the dying world of Charn, and Uncle Andrew, the magician who had deceived the children for his own purposes, are not charmed, and in fact are distracted, irritated, and chattering about their own agendas. The cabbie impatiently tells them to hush. "Watchin' and listenin's the thing at present."¹ Later in the story the children want Aslan to help Uncle Andrew out of his desperate predicament. Aslan's response is telling: "He has made himself unable to hear my voice."² There is a limit to what he can do for someone who is disconnected from spiritual desire.

"Listening's the thing right now," we agree, but listening is an art that we have not necessarily cultivated. In our ordinary lives we are often poor listeners. Students can be looking right at the teacher, seemingly attentive, but only half listening, and miss the instructions for an assignment. A friend gives directions to an out-of-the-way place; we start out well, but soon feel a loss of focus and end up hopelessly lost. When the doctor has some news of our medical condition we panic and miss crucial pieces of the diagnosis. When we are at an impasse in a conversation we do not hear the other person's position because we are planning our own retort. We

1. Lewis, *Magician's Nephew*, 125.

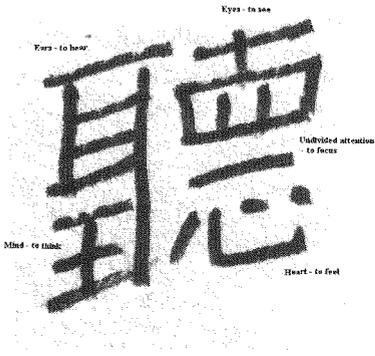
2. *Ibid.*, 202–3.

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have difficulty maintaining attention during a lecture, sermon, or discussion. Even an intimate conversation between two friends can be derailed in failure to hear each other.

When we turn to matters of the heart, our ears may be stopped in inattentiveness and carelessness, fears and anxieties, preoccupations and stubborn desires. The spiritual life mirrors our outer life of distraction and we need help to hear the words of God. It is no wonder that Jesus spoke in parables and exclaimed, “Listen! . . . Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (Mark 4:3, 9). He tells the story of the sower who goes out to sow seed, which falls on the unproductive soil of the path, rocky ground, and among thorns. Hope comes from a fourth place—falling into good soil and bringing forth grain (4:8); this success provides a paradigm for aspiring disciples. His interpretation for the parable is only given to those who stay with him “when he [is] alone” (4:10)—those prepared to really listen.

The traditional Chinese character embodying the idea of “listening” captures the intensity and intentionality that is needed to truly hear. It in-



cludes five different symbols depicting “ears,” “mind,” “eyes,” “undivided attention,” and “heart.” In some renditions these symbols are given a kind of story line: The “ear” is what one uses to listen; the “king” suggests one needs to pay attention as if the other person were king; “ten and eye” calls one to be observant as if one had ten eyes; “one” implies listening with individual attention; and “heart” points out that one listens with

one’s heart in addition to ear and eye. This complex of ideas illustrates that true listening is not a casual recognition of someone speaking but a real desire to hear and understand the intentions of the person. There is an assumption that the listener will respond in a meaningful way.

Jesus’ figure of speech is the language of soil: there is the hard, unresponsive ground of the pathway. These are hearers of Jesus’ words who, like Lewis’s Uncle Andrew, are unable or unwilling to hear. The rocky ground implies possibility, but the words of Christ will not go deep into the hearer’s hearts. The cluttered soil where the seed is choked by thorns signals listeners who are too distracted by life’s cares to absorb the life-giving words. The disciple who is tuned in to listen to Jesus’ words with heart, mind, and will

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to obey is the one spoken of as good soil. The cabbie and Digory and Jill, enrapt and excited by Aslan's creation, model this kind of discipleship as they go on to participate in Aslan's plans for Narnia.

There is a longstanding tradition that God whispers in our ears; he does not shout. It is in "the holy whisper," writes the Quaker mystic, that we hear Abba's voice, not in the noise of the clamoring crowds or the incessant barrage of social media.³ From our deep Christian past we hear the voice of Augustine murmur, "*Whisper in my heart, I am here to save you. Speak so that I may hear your words. My heart has ears ready to listen to you, Lord. Open them wide and whisper in my heart, I am here to save you. I shall hear your voice and make haste to clasp you to myself.*"⁴ Augustine's prayer, in turn, points to two pivotal and familiar biblical stories that speak to the reality of Abba's whisper.

The first memorable story of hearing Abba's voice comes from the childhood of an early prophet during the tutelage of Samuel by Eli, the priest at Shiloh (1 Sam 3). The story begins with the boy Samuel sleeping in the temple and hearing a voice call out his name, "Samuel! Samuel!" Thinking it is the voice of Eli, he answers, "Here I am," and runs to him to see what he needs. Eli responds by curtly telling him to go back to bed because he did not call him. The same scenario happens twice more and on each occasion Samuel runs to Eli to provide assistance. Finally, Eli perceives that God is speaking to Samuel and he instructs him to respond to God's call with the answer, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (v. 9). Indeed, God not only speaks, but he comes down and stands before the boy uttering the double evocative "Samuel! Samuel!" The boy faithfully responds, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (v. 10). The narrative reminds us of God's quiet voice initially stirring the boy to wake up and pay attention to his call. It is so subtle that Eli hears nothing, and it has to happen three times before the aged priest provides guidance. On the other hand, Samuel is able to hear the gentle invitation of Abba and is receptive to Eli's instruction so that he might "know the Lord, and the word of the Lord" (v. 7) and enter into a faithful, listening relationship with God so that "none of his words [fall] to the ground" (v. 19).

The second narrative is found within the confines of Elijah's flight from the horrors of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel (1 Kgs 18–19). The context of the narrative reveals that through the power of God Elijah has

3. Kelly, *Testament of Devotion*, 93.

4. Augustine, *Confessions*, 24.

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defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, demonstrated in fire from heaven completely consuming the sacrifices of the false prophets. Following the victory Elijah hears from Queen Jezebel that she desires to kill him, so he flees to Beersheba in the southernmost part of the Sinai Peninsula. Following a brief respite he continues his journey for forty days and reaches Mount Horeb, entering “the cave” (perhaps the very cave where Moses hid in the cleft of the rock; Exod 33:21–23) to hide from the evil queen and to ponder his gloomy situation. During this time of introspection Elijah is nudged by God to leave the confines of the cave, for the Lord is going to pass by and communicate with him even as he had for Moses. Responding to this premonition, the prophet goes outside and experiences a great storm raging with gale-like winds, ground-shaking earthquakes, and spontaneous fire outbreaks, but none of these make much impression on his frightened and saddened emotional overcast. Yet, following the pyrotechnics there is a “sound of sheer silence” and the narrative informs us that “when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave” and hears the voice of God: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1 Kgs 19:12–13). It is not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire but in the sound of sheer silence that Elijah senses the presence and hears the voice of God. In the silence God whispers the prophet’s name and gains his attention to encourage and challenge him to re-engage his prophetic vocation.

Both stories speak of the need to pay attention and to listen for the interior small voice. God speaks quietly and invites the attentive and receptive heart to respond to his overtures of love. The passionate listening implied in the Chinese character above is what is needed and required to hear the subtle expressions of Abba’s voice. It is like the gentle whisper of “sheer silence” in Elijah’s ear or Samuel hearing his name whispered in the quiet of the night. God does not overwhelm us with his majestic presence; if he did we would automatically fall down in worship from awe or involuntary desire. Rather, God speaks quietly and respectfully so that we are not overpowered by his transcendence, but drawn by his love. Gerald May writes, “I think God refuses to be an object for attachment because God desires full love, not addiction. Love born of true freedom, love free from attachment, requires that we search for a deepening awareness of God, just as God freely reaches out to us.”⁵ God purposely remains elusive so that our finding of him is the fruit of an authentic passion to be whole and integrated into his

5. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 94.

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tapestry of abundant love. His love is never forced upon us. It is a gift that has to be received with both open hands and an open heart, demonstrated in an alertly listening ear.

It is demanding and stretching to listen—to even want to listen—in this manner. It is not surprising that we fill our space with background stimuli. There is the noise of television shows in our homes and the perpetual music in our ears as we drive and walk. We are unconsciously (or intentionally) obsessed with our cell phones, texting someone or simply surfing the continual stream of information on the Net. Frequently there is no specific purpose for these actions other than mere amusement, a desire to assuage boredom, or create a fleeting connection through a quick message. As a consequence, we need to do more than develop the art of listening. We must reach back to that desire, however hesitant, that the psalmist describes in dramatic terms: “My soul longs, indeed it faints, for the courts of the Lord” (Ps 84:2). We must, in a sense, wake up. “It is not easy to be sensitive to the delicate action of the Spirit,” writes Catherine Doherty in *Poustinia*:

The Spirit moves so very lightly, lighter than the breeze, lighter than the air. When you breathe you are not aware of the air in the room. You are so used to breathing that you don’t think about the air. The *poustinik* (i.e., “attentive hearer of God”) must become conscious of the air.⁶

We need to train ourselves to listen for God’s voice in this intentional manner. The path begins to present itself as we consider the ways that God speaks and the means he uses, drawing us to himself and communicating his unceasing love.

In the chapters that follow in the first part of this book we consider seven paths of listening. These may be familiar practices that we already consider important in our lives. Some we readily acknowledge but do not really engage in any intentional manner. Others seem less familiar avenues to open ourselves to Abba’s whispers. The second part identifies seven challenges we may face in the practice of listening. Naturally, each of us has our unique proclivities and circumstances that may draw our attention to one or another of these situations. The questions at the end of each chapter help us determine specific attitudes or actions we may want to adopt.

At times we wonder, “Why does it matter if I hear from God? With the complications of my life I do not have time for additional metaphysical questions!” Certainly we live busy lives with many distractions—pressing family concerns, heavy workloads, financial headaches, and demanding

6. Doherty, *Poustinia*, 48.

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commutes! Whether or not we hear from God may not seem to be the most pressing issue as we draw up our daily agendas. Indeed, listening for his voice may be a helpful ideal, but practically an aspiration to pursue at a future point. We are called up short by Annie Dillard's blunt observation: "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives."⁷ Our life story is comprised of our everyday living patterns. At some point our daily steps need to be embraced and slowed down so that the full sum of our days are held with meaning and purpose.

For this transformation of the spending of our days and lives to happen, we might consider the question of "living larger lives," a phrase coined by Henri Nouwen, which speaks to the reality of living full and abundant lives in the presence of God.⁸ Living larger lives encompasses a perspective that embraces the everyday with a sense of vocation, purpose, and joy. It is derived from knowing life's source and allowing our lives to flow from it. It creatively spurs us on to make healthy, life-affirming choices. Largeness requires reclaiming the art of listening for Abba's voice amidst the cacophony of voices; otherwise, we get lost in the demands of the urgent moment. Largeness also invites us to take time to rest in the arms of the Beloved rather than rushing to utilitarian action. Finally, largeness nurtures patience and waiting for the *kairos* moment that leads us on the path towards effective and meaningful action. It is essential, not optional, to reclaim the art of listening, which provides a quiet counterpoint to the jarring sound bites of contemporary media. If we do not learn to listen, the sounds of the world will drown out the still, small, respectful voice of Abba and mask the fundamental purpose, in Kierkegaard's memorable words, of "willing one thing," which holds the deepest promise for our existence.

7. Dillard, *Writing Life*, 32.

8. Roderick, *Beloved*, 43-44.