

The Spirit Nudges
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TONY

We posted a video about a fictional guy named Doug who gets direct messages from God all day long as he goes about his life. It's humorous, and we like that it points out that most of us don't hear from God quite that way! :) How about you? :) Did you see a message from God on your bathroom mirror after a shower this morning? :) I didn't! But I do know God "speaks" to his people... to you and, yes, even to me. :)

Or, let's put it this way... God "nudges". And so that's what we're talking about today...the way the Spirit nudges us. This message builds on what we've been teaching over the past several weeks about Pentecost and the life of the Spirit. If the Spirit did come on the Day of Pentecost, if the Spirit does live within all of us who are in Christ, if the Spirit is indeed prompting, provoking, prodding, and the other things we talked about last week, how does the Spirit do that? How do we hear and discern what the Spirit is saying to us, if not a note in our lunchbox?

There are two challenges off the bat in trying to answer those questions. The first is that many Christians don't think that God speaks to them at all. We've heard that from some of you over the years, haven't we? :) Well, we've got good news for you today!... because the Spirit is indeed nudging, perhaps in ways that you or I haven't recognized as the Spirit yet.

The other challenge is that some Christians do believe God speaks to them but what they think he says makes us scratch our heads. There's a whole book of these stories, called "God Made Me Do It!" Did God tell a man to perform surgery on himself? Did he instruct a young man to "TP" a police station? Did he insist that a woman direct traffic topless? We can laugh at those, of course, but there are many stories in history of more serious things that people did because they mistakenly thought God told them...but on what basis do we say that they're mistaken?

Let's see if we can address those two challenges today and give you some encouragement about how the Spirit nudges ordinary folks like us to live the life of the Spirit in the real world.

JO ANN

Before we get into specifics, there are several general things to keep in mind. First. The Spirit's nudges are real. Comedian Lily Tomlin once said: "Why is it that when we speak to God we are said to be praying, but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?" As Christians, we have great compassion for those who struggle with mental illness, hearing voices which are not real... yet, Christians expect to "hear" God's voice and sense the nudges of the Holy Spirit... because God is real and really communicates with us...

The scripture is full of passages assuring us that God not only spoke in days of old... but that He continues to speak through the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. We find this throughout the

book of Acts in the weeks, months, and years after Pentecost... sometimes the Spirit gave extraordinary messages, but most often, it was the ordinary discernment of the Spirit's presence and direction to those who were open and listening. Here are a few other examples of hundreds we could offer you:

Jeremiah: Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known. (Jeremiah 33:3 NRSV)

Isaiah: Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." (Isaiah 30:21 NIV)

Jesus: My sheep listen to My voice... (John 10:27 NIV)

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears... (John 16:13 NRSV)

Whoever is of God hears the words of God. (John 8:47 ESV)

The Spirit doesn't always communicate in ways we expect... yet, God does still communicate today... and the Spirit's nudges are quite real.

TONY

Second, the Spirit's nudges are not only for "big stuff" but for ordinary life. When I was ordained years ago, I was interviewed by an impressive array of old men in suits. One of the questions they really wanted answered was whether and how I was "called" to pastoral ministry. They were hoping I had had an "experience" of some sort! Well, I did, sort of... :) When I was just a kid... 10 years old... I was sitting in my home church one Sunday listening to my pastor preach and I had a nudge... "Someday you're going to do that." It wasn't words, of course; it was more like a realization. And it wasn't from me... I wasn't thinking that; I doubt I was even paying attention to the sermon. But there it was, unbidden and unexpected... and here I am, 45 years later, doing what I was told I would do someday. Pretty cool, eh?

Does the Spirit only speak to us, then, about "big stuff" like being called to be a pastor, or who you ought to marry, or what job to take? You already know the answer, don't you? :) It's awesome if God gives us clear direction for the big stuff like that... but by far most of the Spirit's nudges are for ordinary life... like the stuff in the video. "Call your sister." "Be kind to your boss today." "Read that book." "Stop and talk to that homeless man." It's the stuff of ordinary life that the Spirit majors in... why?... because the Spirit is not an occasional visitor to your life, showing up with a grand entrance! The Spirit is IN you, always with you, going through ordinary life WITH you...and so the nudges are part of that relationship. :)

And if by far most of the Spirit's nudges are for ordinary life, it's also true that by far most of the Spirit's nudges *feel* rather ordinary too. The Bible has some wonderfully dramatic stories of visits from angels, visions in the middle of the night, and that sort of thing. They were real. They

happened. And stuff like that still happens. But those were written down because they were rare and extraordinary. If you have one of those dramatic revelations from God, awesome! But let's not miss all the ordinary nudges while waiting and hoping for "something big." :)

My experience of being called to be a pastor was a big deal for my life... and one that was confirmed in a number of ways over the coming years. But it came as a little nudge, a realization, that's all. There were no trumpets blaring, no angel in white, no loud voice kicking me out of my seat. Just a knowing. And that was enough. 45 years later it's still enough.

The same is true in the Bible. In the book of Acts there are stories of the Spirit showing up dramatically for the disciples, particularly early on, but over time they have fewer of those dramatic experiences and more of "just knowing." They would say things like "***It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us***" (Acts 15:28) without experiencing earth, wind, and fire. :) How did they know? Because they had learned by then to trust the nudge of the indwelling Spirit. And so this is our focus today....to encourage you to notice the Spirit in the midst of ordinary life. :)

JO ANN

Third, The Spirit's nudges are ordinary, yet have a different quality. In other words, there is something that you recognize as "more" than just you. Most of us have a to-do list in our heads that we keep checking off throughout the day. But we have all experienced when one of those items suddenly takes on more importance than the rest... or someone's face suddenly appears in our mind's eye drawing our attention away from the list completely. Very often, that urgent quality is the Spirit nudging us to rearrange our schedule to take care of that particular item on the list NOW... or to stop and pray for that person... or call to see if they are okay.

This morning, I remembered that sometime last fall or winter I kept sensing a nudge for Hosanna to get ready to livestream services. This was unusual because I have NEVER wanted to livestream services and pushed hard against the idea in the past. But this nudge wouldn't let me go... so I talked with Jeff about it and what it might take for us to get things in place to do that. I am smiling now, because we had no idea Coronavirus was on the horizon... and I did not recognize until today that the Spirit was gently nudging us to get ready. Jeff and the team did some good thinking about it... and that has helped us in recent days as we are getting ready to reopen our building for services.

It's a good example, though... because God is not angry that we didn't get everything in place then. We are doing it now! But this morning, it was quite reassuring to see that the Spirit knew what was coming... and was not only nudging our tech ministry to start researching... but was also at work lowering my resistance to the idea so I would be willing to livestream now. :) The Spirit's nudges are ordinary... with a sense of something "more"... a stirring in the soul... a sense of an inner "yes"... a thought or emotion that you know is more than you...

TONY

Fourth, the Spirit's nudges are unique to each of us. While there are some common ways the Spirit speaks to us all as human beings, the Spirit honors everyone. The Spirit honors your unique personality, your unique way of doing life. The Spirit speaks your language. :) God created each of us for a unique relationship with him, which only we can share... just like each of us has unique relationships with the people in our lives. If you have children, even if you love them equally, you will relate with them differently, right? It's how we honor each of them. We become students of each one... not treating them all as if they were identical... and if we want to notice the Spirit's nudges for each of us, uniquely, we become students of ourselves, as well.

This is true in Scripture too, even in the dramatic stories. Moses sees a burning bush, Mary gets a visit from an angel, Paul sees a light and hears a voice. The Spirit has no "one right way" of communicating with us... so I shouldn't insist that he has to show up for me the same way he shows up for Jo Ann. I'll miss something if I do that! Instead, I can trust that the Spirit knows me better than I even know myself...and so knows how to nudge me in ways unique to me. Maybe someday I'll get a message written in my pizza toppings! :)

JO ANN

Fifth, as Tony just pointed out, The Spirit's nudges are rooted in relationship. We say at Hosanna that we were made for relationship because we were created in the likeness and image of a relational God. God knows us inside and out... but we rarely consider that God also wants to be known by us! How can so many Christians talk about having a personal relationship with God in Christ, yet think that knowing things about God is the same as knowing God?? I know a LOT about Henry VIII and his wives... but I never knew or had a relationship with any of them. I do have a personal relationship with my dear friend, Deb, though... and if someone were to tell me that Deb had a craving for chocolate and wanted me to bring her some... I would know immediately that person was lying. Because I know Deb, and Deb hates chocolate!

God wants us to know Him like that! Most of us would be satisfied if God would just tell us what to do, but God wants us to know who He is. We want facts and answers, but God wants a personal relationship with us, full of intimacy and conversation... and, yes Deb, chocolate! :)

TONY

Next, the Spirit's nudges prompt us to pay attention...to become and remain aware of what is going on, both around and inside of us. It's easy to slip into "auto-pilot" and miss a lot. It's been real easy to do that lately, hasn't it? There's been so much tumult "out there" that we might be tempted to try to block it all out. But be careful!...in doing so we might block out the good stuff too by accident... the Spirit who is prompting, prodding, even provoking us, to see things, to hear things, and to be transformed, even or especially in a time of discomfort.

Jesus pointed out to his disciples that they knew how to read the sky to know what the weather would be...and, likewise, they needed to learn how to read "the times" and understand what God was doing (**Matt. 16:3**). They needed to sense which way the wind of the Spirit was blowing,

and join God in that. And that means developing the spiritual maturity and capacity to understand what's going on with both the externals ... what's happening "out there"... and the internals...what's happening "in here." In fact, we'll talk about specific ways the Spirit nudges, in just a minute or two, using precisely those two categories... external and internal nudges.

JO ANN

Finally, The Spirit's nudges come in a wide variety of ways. Let's first look at some of the ways the Spirit nudges us from outside ourselves, the first two ways are quite familiar and expected. In fact, the early Church said that God reveals Himself through two "books"... first, the Canon: The book of Scripture.

As we said earlier, we study the scriptures in order to learn about God, and that is a very good thing. Yet, the Spirit also reveals who God is by nudging us through the scriptures, as we are reading them (like when a word or image "jumps" out at us, inviting us to stop and ask the Spirit to show us why... I remember a time that happened when I was a new Christian. A friend's daughter had been hospitalized and was dying, and I was praying about it. I sat down to read scripture, and the bible opened to Psalm 118 and my sight landed on verse 17: ***I will not die, but live to tell what the Lord has done.*** I "just knew" it was for her. A few days later, her condition improved and she is still alive today. I learned personally that God still heals today through that experience:) The Spirit also nudges as we are hearing the scriptures taught (you have no idea how many times folks thank Tony and me for something we said in our sermons, which we actually never said!)... and when we are simply living our lives... like when you are talking with someone and a meaningful scripture comes to mind out of nowhere for them.

The Spirit also nudges us through the Book of Creation, as Romans 1:20 tells us: ***For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.... (NIV)***

This happens in a general way for everyone... the infinite expanse of space reveals God's infinite being... the seasons and tides reveal God's faithfulness... And, there are times when the Spirit speaks very personally to us through specific aspects of Creation... a pet who sits in your lap at just the moment when you are feeling sad or alone, to let you know that God is with you... or a beautiful sunset that is somehow more than a sunset, opening your heart to feel the love of God... or a bird that is more than a bird.

I remember being with a friend in her home when a bird started flying into the window again and again. She became upset, saying that the bird had been doing that for days and she had done everything she knew to keep it from hurting itself, but it wouldn't stop. I asked her whether God might be saying something to her through the bird. A light bulb came on and she told me how she was feeling like she was just banging her head against a wall in a particular situation... so we talked about it and prayed. And the next week she called to tell me that the bird had not returned since. :)

God also created time as a part of Creation... so, although coincidences do happen which have no spiritual significance... there are times when the Spirit often nudges us through the timing of things... through coincidences, synchronicity... like when you were wondering about something, that someone else just happens to mention in off-hand conversation... that someone else just happens to send you an article about... When you notice patterns and themes, it may be more than disconnected events... it may actually be the Spirit nudging you to pay attention. Personally, I have adopted a "rule of three"... if something comes to my attention in unconnected ways three times, I will engage it to see whether the Spirit is inviting me in some way.

TONY

There's the Creation and there's also the "Created"--things that people create that the Spirit also uses to nudge us... stuff like signs, books, art, and so on. This is why Hosanna has done a movie series for over 20 years... because the Spirit nudges so often through these visual stories created by gifted artists. I walked for several days on the Camino with a friend who was in pain, and wanted to know if God wanted her to keep walking or go home. People often assume that pastors know what God thinks about everything :)... but I couldn't answer that one for her. So she prayed for a sign from God. When we got to the next town, the first thing we saw was a big, sign, actually blocking our path, pointing us to turn, with big letters saying "Keep going!" :) Seriously. So Katrine got her sign, and she kept going.

No, we don't always get literal signs telling us what to do but I love that the Spirit has a sense of humor and does that sometimes. :) It wasn't wrong, by the way, for Katrine to ask me if I knew what she should do, by the way...not because I was a "Camino priest," as she called me, but because the Spirit also nudges through other people, through Community. We are one with the Spirit, but because it's the same Spirit, we are one with each other... and so the Spirit speaks through us to each other. Have you ever had someone say to you, "I think God told me to tell you this?" I have!...and from some of you. And I pay attention to that. :) And I have done the same myself, albeit with some fear and trembling.

That's because, as in all things, hearing the nudges of the Spirit requires a delicate balancing act. The individual should not be overridden by the community.... because an unhealthy spiritual community will not always honor the nudge of the Spirit in an individual... but the community should also not be overridden by the individual... because all of us need help from outside of ourselves to both notice and discern what the Spirit is doing within us....

JO ANN

Okay... those are some of the ways that the Spirit nudges us externally... let's look at some of the ways that those nudges come Internally. We are whole beings and our "parts" are not easily separated... but it's easiest to talk about these internal nudges by identifying them with certain aspects of our being. Just recognize that there is overlap in these.

First, the Spirit nudges us through our head... through our thoughts, though we often miss it because we mistake those brilliant ideas or insights as our own? 😊 As we become students of ourselves, it will become more clear which thoughts are ours, and which are not. The Spirit also nudges with words... sometimes one or two, sometimes a sentence or two. Direct words like this happen occasionally... are usually accompanied by a sense of surprise or deep resonance. When I was in my early 30s, in a conversation with a former pastor about a question I had about the book of Romans, the answer did not come from him but within me... one utterly surprising sentence: "Because I am, you are." I have been living into the meaning of that sentence every moment of my life since.

The Spirit also nudges us by bringing memories of the past to mind... sometimes to invite us to receive some healing, or to offer forgiveness, or to allow God to show us more about how that event fits into the bigger story of grace and redemption He is outworking in our lives. Sometimes the Spirit surfaces a memory so that we can take some action... to right a wrong, for example, or to write a letter of gratitude.

The Spirit's nudges through our minds are not limited to thoughts, memories, or even words... but can also come wordlessly, through pictures in our imagination. You might have a vision... see yourself or someone else doing or saying something... or you may have a dream in which you are given direction or wisdom for a situation in your life. Of course, as with all of these nudges, discernment is needed... yet it is important that we do not rule out certain ways that the Spirit might nudge us simply because they seem a bit weird or woo-woo to us. The scriptures are full of the Spirit nudging God's people in all of these ways... so who are we to limit what God might do?

TONY

The Spirit nudges through our head and also through our heart... our emotions, our desires, and our affections. None of these are perfect guides for us, of course, because our hearts have been broken, our desires corrupted, and our feelings confused...but!...the Spirit is within us healing our heart and restoring our capacity to discern the Spirit's nudges there. So let's trust that our hearts too can be used by the Spirit to help us notice what God is doing.

What does that look like? Well, we might sometimes feel a strong desire for something... something good... something that, well, sort of feels like God. Maybe a desire to stop everything and worship, or to reach out to someone and bless them, or to visit someplace we've never been. And that unexpected desire might then incite a holy curiosity... a wondering about why we're being drawn to that, and why we're being drawn now. And so we might ask God if there's something in this wanting and wondering that we should pay attention to. And then we listen... we pay attention... for God. We see if there are other nudges, from other directions, that might confirm that there's something for us to do, to learn, or say as a result. Make sense?

The experience I alluded to earlier of going to Spain in 207 to walk the Camino de Santiago... began like that. I saw a movie about it and I found myself inexplicably wanting to do it. It was a

desire I couldn't shake, even after a number of years. I grew curious about this strangeness...it seemed out of character for me.... but the Spirit kept nudging me to take a risk and go. And, of course, when I finally did, it was a powerful spiritual experience. I came home different.

JO ANN

The Spirit also nudges us through our Gut... our intuition, our deep 'knowing.' When God finally answered Job, one of the things He asks is: ***Who has put wisdom in the inward parts or given understanding to the mind? (Job 38:36 ESV)***. God has given each one of us an ability to know things "deep down in our knower" which we may not be able to explain in words, and which may sometimes not be based in reason, but are true nonetheless. The words most used of this capacity are "intuition" or "gut knowing." Another good old-fashioned term is "inner witness of the Spirit."

We've all had an experience where something we planned seemed fine on the surface, but there was a wordless "red flag" waving in our gut. Sometimes that is just normal anxiety... but sometimes that is the Spirit nudging us to stop. Christians are often taught to override their guts... that only what can be explained or objectively proven can be trusted. Yet, both scripture and experience teach us that there are times when God wants us to go with our guts. :)

TONY

Finally, the Spirit also nudges us through our bodies....yes, the same bodies that sometimes seem to get in the way of the life of the Spirit. God made our bodies. God inhabited a human body in Jesus. And the Spirit inhabits ours as well. I love how the medieval poet-priest named Simeon the New Theologian put it... "We awaken in Christ's body." Indeed! Every morning.

The Spirit particularly uses our five senses to nudge us...which makes sense, so to speak. :) Our senses are how we experience the world, so our senses are also how we can experience the Spirit. So Jesus said, "***Those who have ears to hear, let them hear***" (***Matt. 13:9***). And the psalmist invites us to "***Taste and see that the Lord is good***" (***Psalms 34:8***) and to "***come and see what God has done***" (***Psalms 66:5***). Christ is described as "***fragrant***" (***Eph. 5:2***), so smell gets involved too. Jesus invited Thomas to touch him, so he would know that the resurrection was for real. On the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit showed up, the disciples saw and probably felt and smelled tongues of fire on their heads, and they heard a mighty wind. It was their senses that told them first that God was doing something remarkable that day.

JO ANN

Your invitation this week...to pay attention to the Spirit's nudges... maybe write them down at the end of each day. If you do this regularly, it can really help you to notice patterns over time. And throughout this week, and the weeks to come, let this be your prayer:
Holy Spirit, lead and guide me. I am listening.