

If you are of a certain age, you might remember when dolls or, ahem, when "action figures," that could talk were pretty popular. Usually, getting G.I. Joe or Barbie to talk involved pulling a string that activated one of a half dozen pre-recorded random sentences. Only rarely did these sentences have anything to do with the scenario you were pretending to act out. Your little sister may have even "borrowed" G.I. Joe a time or two to have a tea party with her dolls where the conversation would go something like this: Barbie says: "Would you like to go shopping?" Joe replies: "We must hold this position. Dig in!"

These days, however, the talking toys your kids or grandkids found under the Christmas tree (about a month ago) are a lot more sophisticated. In fact, the same speech recognition technology that enables you to have a conversation with your smart phone is now being used to turn dolls into a high-tech version of Chatty Cathy. A 21st-century iteration of the classic Barbie doll, for example, was unveiled just a few years ago at the New York Toy Fair.

Instead of a string, Hello Barbie uses a Wi-Fi connection and speech recognition technology to have what almost appears to be real conversations with kids. A reporter from CNBC "interviewed" Barbie at the Toy Fair. Barbie performed so well that onlookers were convinced there had to be someone behind a curtain with a microphone answering the questions.

Or course, "Hello Barbie" wasn't fully and 100% accepted by everyone, she did have some critics as you can possibly imagine. Parent and child advocacy groups were concerned about privacy. The data could be used to capture and modify the doll's conversations (and use subtle advertising for more Barbie products). Toymakers, on the other hand, countered that parents can sign up to hear recordings of their child's interactions with the doll -- which sounds a lot more like a plot out of a Cold War spy movie than wholesome child's play.

The bottom line, however, is that, as speech recognition technology gets more and more complex, it's going to get harder to tell whether we're having a "real" conversation, or a computer-generated one. Which may make us realize that there may be times when we need to really pay attention and learn to listen to the right and real voices in our lives. And discerning the right voice has been an issue long before we had smartphones and talking dolls. The Bible is full of stories where people, including kids, heard a voice, and had to decide whether to respond or not.

Abram was hanging out in Haran when he heard a voice saying to him, "Go west, young man!" The actual quotation is, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Moses was tending sheep in the middle of nowhere when he heard a voice coming from a burning bush. Samuel was a little boy sleeping on a cot in the temple when he heard a voice calling his name. Isaiah was also in the temple when he heard the Lord say, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Elijah was in the cleft of a mountain when he heard the "still small voice," and when he heard God say to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And then there's this week's text, where a boy named Jeremiah hears a voice and decides to get interactive with it.

The voice he hears, of course, is the voice of God. But we have to wonder how each of these biblical heroes heard it and, perhaps even more importantly, what made them answer. A 21st-century kid might have an increasingly tough time differentiating between a real voice and a computer-generated one, but apparently as a kid Jeremiah knew right away that the voice he was hearing was the Lord's. Which begs the question, how did he know, and how do we know, when we're hearing the voice of God? Thankfully Jeremiah's story offers us some clues.

For starters, God's voice is best heard in the context of a community of faith. The words written down in the book of Jeremiah tell us that he was the son of a

priest named Hilkiyah from Anathoth, a town just north of Jerusalem that was one of the cities assigned to the priestly class of Levites. Growing up within a priestly community, Jeremiah would have known the stories about Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and so many others who had heard God's call. He would have been schooled in regular prayer and would have witnessed the people of his village poring over sacred texts to determine God's will and way for their lives. The voice of God thus came to Jeremiah, not out of the blue, but in the context of a community devoted to God; a community where people discerned God's voice together.

In a world where technology tends to isolate people, and where a kid can have hours of conversations with a doll instead of with friends or family, we need to remember that we're wired to hear God's voice best within community. It's in community that we can check the inner stirrings of our hearts with others who can help us discern the voice of God through Scripture. It's in community that we can worship together and pray together. Regular connection to Christian community is the key to making sure that the voice we're hearing is actually God's, and not simply an advertisement for our own desires.

Then, there's the fact that: God's voice is best heard in conversation with God. We don't know exactly how God's call "came" to Jeremiah. Perhaps it was in a dream. Perhaps it was an inner voice, or maybe it was during a time of prayer. But, like Moses and Samuel before him, Jeremiah decides to test the voice by entering into a conversation with it, even pushing back against it.

God told Jeremiah that Jeremiah had been appointed to a prophetic mission before he was even born. Having been schooled in the story of Moses, Jeremiah raises a conversational objection. "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy!" God knows Jeremiah, but Jeremiah also knows himself, and what being "a prophet to the nations" will entail. By pushing back in

the conversation, Jeremiah can sort out whether his call is something coming from within himself, which could be easily dismissed, or whether this was coming from God -- a call that could not be discounted quite so fast.

It's an interesting pattern in the Bible -- those who are the most powerfully used by God are those who take the time to test God's call with a conversation. In fact, conversation is one of the keys to a lasting relationship with our Creator that's not built on an algorithm. Jeremiah's response to God, "Ah, Lord God" is language that usually preceded a prayer in the form of lament or complaint. The Bible reveals a lot of these kinds of conversational prayers; the Psalms are full of them, as are the stories of biblical heroes including Jesus who has his own pushback conversation with God in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Indeed, it seems like God invites this kind of conversation, even if God will always have the last word! We sometimes forget that prayer is a two-way street, and that God doesn't just give us a series of commands. Plenty of people have claimed to have been ordered by God to do something but failed to enter into a conversation with God to determine whose voice they were actually hearing. In fact, it probably wouldn't take us very long to brainstorm a list of certain religious cult leaders that fall into that category.

Although a computer server can pump out sentences in response to a person's voice, it can never actually know the heart of a person, his fears, or her feelings. God allows us to bring those fears and feelings to the table when we converse with the divine. Yes, God wants our obedience, but it seems that God also desires that obedience to emerge out of a deep relationship, rather than out of mere obligation. Regular prayer is a running conversation with God that allows us to test the words that we hear to see whether they are from God. Our Lord, Our Savior, Our redeemer invites us, both individually and collectively, to test His words given

to us in scripture and prayer, by encouraging us to be in fellowship with other Christians, so that we can hear God's voice clearly!

And finally there is one other thing for us to consider as I wrap up today's message! God will always supply the resources we need. When we have a deep relationship with God, our conversations lead us to a radical honesty about our shortcomings in comparison to God's glory. Jeremiah recognized that he had a shortfall in his experience, and in his ability to speak, but these were not barriers to God. In fact, it seems that God -- to cite a popular saying -- usually doesn't call the qualified, but, rather, qualifies the called. God was the one who put words in the mouth of Jeremiah, and God will be the one who ensures that Jeremiah's mission is a successful one, even if it will cost Jeremiah a lot in the process.

Some of the most powerful words in the Bible are the repeated promise of God: "I am with you!" We have an assurance that the God who calls us will continue to be in conversation with us, and that same God will continue to lead us. Those conversations are the ones that we need to remember, write down, and review often as we follow God wherever God leads. After all, God always recognizes our voices – and with no strings attached I might add. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.