You may have heard me tell this story before so if you have, I give you permission to daydream about a vacation in Barbados until I finish. So here goes the story. When I took the Basic Chaplain Course for the Air Force, we had a visit from the guy who was in charge of assigning locations for active-duty chaplains. His talk covered the logistics and how to go about requesting a specific post, adding that if you did have a specific place in mind it would be taken into consideration but there were no guarantees. He then said that in his time doing the job he had heard from numerous chaplains who earnestly told him that they had heard from God and that God had told them that he was calling them to Hickam Air Force Base on the island of Oahu. Meaning that if these chaplains were not chosen, the guy in charge of placement would essentially be thwarting the will of God. He then added rather tongue in cheek that strangely in that same time frame he had never had a chaplain plead with him that God was calling them to Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota; which lead him to believe that some chaplains may have been confusing God’s will with their own.

I was thinking about this story today when reading our lesson from the Old Testament. It comes in the context of God speaking to Moses and part of it says, “Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.” Now I am not sure if God is going to kill off all the chaplains who claimed they were being called to Oahu, but it does point out a real danger and that danger has to do with speaking in the name of God when we are really speaking in the name of ourselves.

Certainly, there are things we can say that we know accord with God’s will – we can simply read the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes, but there are also areas that are grayer, where it is much more difficult to objectively state that God has an opinion on the matter. While we can say that God wants us to keep the Sabbath holy can we also say that God wants us to buy a Buick Enclave or order the Nachos Bellgrande? I know that those are somewhat silly examples but I knew a person who claimed that God delayed an airline flight so they would not miss it and another person who insisted that God demanded that they buy a $1.5 million house -- pretty specific things. And so it would seem that the first question we need to answer when claiming to speak for God comes down to how deeply into the minutia do we think God goes in our lives? That is, is God content for us to simply follow his instructions in terms of the big rules like loving him and our neighbor or does God’s opinion stretch down to what we eat, where we work or how we decorate our living room? And broadly speaking this is a divide in Christendom. Mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics and the Orthodox tend to take the more restricted view of God’s instructions for our lives whereas more Pentecostal and Evangelical traditions tend to have a larger view of God’s opinions believing that he is constantly updating us on what socks we should wear and the fabric we should use when reupholstering the sofa. And so, which is right? While I certainly think scripture can be used to justify both positions, I am more comfortable with the more conservative view and I will tell you why.

The short version of my endorsement of the restricted view goes back to what God tells Moses about only wanting us to speak in his name when we are actually speaking in his name. Let’s think of it in terms of odds. Let’s say that you are pretty in-tune with God and so when you claim to speak for God your sinful nature only gets in the way 10% of the time, meaning that every ten times you speak only once do you use God to justify yourself. That may seem reasonable but would we drive a car that only exploded 10% of the time? I mean those odds make a Ford Pinto look like a paragon of safety. If God means what he says today about speaking what has not been commanded then it would seem to me that we should be incredibly careful about telling people that God has told us to do this or that. If you want further proof about this cautious approach to the way in which we invoke God in explaining our decisions just look at the Ten Commandments and number three which says to not take the name of the Lord in vain. It is telling us that God can’t be used to add gravitas to banal situations. This is why we are not supposed to say things like, “Oh my God this is the best churro I have ever eaten.” The idea is that we are to look up to God not drag God down here with us and invoke his name every time we see something on Instagram that tickles our fancy. Think about that paradigm when we say things like God told me to buy this dining room set. While I am sure God is not against us having a place to sit down and eat dinner, I am not so sure that He has strong opinions on Scandinavian Contemporary versus Queen Anne. God is not there to legitimize our personal desires rather God is there for us to raise our gaze to grow towards his perfection.

Before I wrap up I want to clarify something. I am not saying that God is not interested in our daily lives nor that we should not pray about things that happen in ordinary and mundane times. We should continually look to God throughout the day for his wisdom, his guidance and his blessing. But what I want to point out is what Paul tells us in 1st Corinthians when he says, “For now we see through a glass, darkly.” We are not always seeing clearly and in such a case it is very easy to get overwhelmed by our sinful nature. And so before we go off announcing that God has told us to do this or that we need to take time to reflect, to invite the counsel of others, to study scripture and to pray.

When I was dean at Nashotah House, we had a student show up who had been denied postulancy for Holy Orders by at least one diocese (it may have been more – I’m getting old and forgetful). However, a little thing like being told that no one else was hearing God in the way they were did not deter them from believing that they were supposed to be clergy, so they showed up to seminary anyway. For the next few years, Fr. Peay tried very hard to find them a bishop who might put them in the process. On at least two occasions bishops took them on only to kick them out of the process when they had done something particularly egregious. The last time I heard they were back to doing the job that they had done before they went to seminary, just with the added debt of their student loans. It is pretty sad and it did not have to happen, but they thought they knew better than what they were seeing and hearing. Mark Twain famously said in regards to the composer Wagner that “people tell me his music is better than it sounds.” I think the danger for us is we want to make God’s word different than it sounds. But when we do that, we are not glorifying God but rather we are glorifying ourselves.

We already have a lot of trouble doing the things that we know God wants us to do. Things like keeping the sabbath holy and not coveting. So here is my advice. When we get all of these basic things down then we can think about expanding our pronouncements on what God is telling us, but until then let’s just work on what the prophet Micah tells us and that is we should strive to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God this day and forevermore.