

Sermon

Jan. 14, 2018

Second Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

Based on 1 Samuel 3:1-10

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“I don’t want to hear it!” Have you ever said that? Sometimes we say it when we are tired of hearing the same excuses. “I’m sorry I forgot to pick you up from work again. I just lost track of time.” “I don’t want to hear it!” One of my new year’s resolutions was to stop watching MSNBC and Fox News. Maybe most of you gave up on cable news a long time ago. I just had to stop watching because I didn’t want to hear it anymore, the opinions and half-truths posing as news, reporting that tried to spin narratives. I was tired of it and so far I have kept to that resolution and have not missed it. All of the shouting, the verbal attacks, the name calling, the nastiness, bullying and bravado, no one wants to hear it!

Who do you want to listen to? It seems like a lot of people wish Oprah had her daily show back on after that speech she gave at the Golden Globes last week. People were expressing hope that she would run for president. It was a powerful speech. We want to listen to people that are good story tellers, who are honest and real. We want to listen to people who are hopeful about the future, that things will get better.

We want to listen to people like Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday is tomorrow. He would have turned 89. And as you may recall, he was assassinated 50 years ago this coming April 4th. King’s preaching was not just oratorical flourishes and well-practiced cadence. King spoke from a deep place, with the certainty of what was right and what was wrong. King had a moral clarity and he was able to communicate that clarity even as he acknowledged that the human condition is complex, that people are not cartoon characters. King spoke from his heart and his soul. He spoke truth even when people who respected him didn’t want to hear what he had to say. For example, 50 years ago yesterday King called for an anti-war rally at the nation’s capital for Feb. 5-6. The New York Times quoted him as saying the following:

“This next year, from today until Nov. 5, may well be the most fateful one that we shall have to face for the rest of this generation...During this year, it will be the war that will decide whether our country regains its balance in world politics and its sanity at home, or turns to more bombs abroad and more arrests at home...The choice for America is clear: Either we will end the war in Vietnam or many of our most sensitive citizens must be sent to jail.”

There were a lot of people who supported King when he was fighting for civil rights. But they were not on board with his views on the Vietnam War. There were a lot of people who didn't want to hear it. But there were others who were encouraged to stand up for what they knew to be right, even if it cost something, because King's words gave them their moral backbone. That's what great speakers can do. They inspire us to be our best selves.

I suspect that maybe sometimes we even want to listen to God. We would love it in times of uncertainty, when we are trying to make a difficult decision, if God would just tell us what to do. “God, will you please tell me the right answer?” A common definition of prayer is that prayer is a conversation between you and God. That sounds good. But my hunch is that for most of us we talk to God more than we listen to what God might say back. We run through our prayer list. Or we read the daily devotion with the little prayer at the end and then move on to the newspaper. Let's be honest, a lot of the praying we do on Sunday morning is us saying words, and precious little silence to see if God might say something back. In fact, I'm not sure if you all would want even five minutes of silence in our worship service. A bunch of people being silent together can get a little awkward. Unless of course you are with Quakers because that's what they do.

Does God even talk to us? What does God's voice sound like? I think we would all agree that God's voice does not sound like James Earl Jones, although that would be pretty cool if it did. Is it a voice you hear or is it just your own voice you hear in your head and you decide that was God speaking to you?

As the story goes, God spoke with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God and Moses talked to each other all the time, like two friends. Moses would go into the Tent of Meeting, and a pillar of smoke would come down onto the tent. After a while, the smoke would go back up to heaven and Moses would head out and go on with his day. We hear the accounts of how God through angels spoke to Abraham and Sarah. God spoke to Isaac and to Jacob.

But as we hear this morning, in the days of the elder priest Eli and his good for nothing sons Hophni and Phinehas, it was a time when the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread. Why was that? Was God not talking or was no one listening? I guess it could go either way. Perhaps God was calling out to Eli but Eli was distracted or simply not paying attention. Or maybe God was frustrated with the way things were going among God's people and God had decided to go silent for a while. Maybe God just didn't have much of anything to say.

Whatever the reason, we are told that early in the morning, before dawn, as the lamp of God was about to go out, God woke up the boy Samuel from his sleep, calling out his name. God did not wake up Eli, the elderly priest, but Samuel, the young apprentice. How come Eli didn't hear the voice? He and Samuel weren't that far apart. Scholars suggest that there was merely a curtain dividing the two spaces where they were sleeping. Surely the voice had to be loud enough to awaken Samuel and that Eli may have heard it as well. Maybe not only was Eli's eyesight going his hearing was slipping as well. Why after the second time Eli didn't get out of bed and go walk around the temple telling whoever was pranking Samuel to knock it off and go home? Maybe he was too tired. Or maybe Eli started to get a hunch that the voice Samuel was hearing was a voice Eli used to hear but hadn't for a long time. It wasn't the voice of another person, a voice that echoes across a room, but instead a voice that echoes in your heart.

After the third time, Eli's hunch seemed to be confirmed. So he taught his apprentice how to respond the next time he heard the voice call his name. He said, "Samuel, if you hear your name called again, this is what you say: Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." That's what Eli had been taught to do. The attentive student heard what Eli told him

to do. And when his name was called a fourth time, Samuel sat up and said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

There is a lot in this phrase, "Speak, for your servant is listening." First of all, it begins with the command "speak." Instead of saying, "Hello?" or "Who is this?" the assumption is that it is God that is calling your name. So you tell God to speak. But then you follow it up immediately with "your servant." You take the posture of a servant being addressed by your master, your Lord. You are awaiting instruction. You say, "your servant is listening." There is a difference between hearing and listening. Kim will tell you. There have been some times where I heard Kim tell me something, but I wasn't really listening. To listen means to pay attention. But not only that, to listen is to be open for what is about to be said. Selective listening doesn't count. Also, when God is speaking, you don't say, "Speak Lord, and tell me what I want to hear." To listen means to have an open mind and an open heart, prepared to take seriously what is about to be said, even if it is something you don't want to hear.

So maybe before we decide to get quiet and listen for God, we need to decide if we are willing to listen to what God might have to say. Maybe what God will say to us is a word of affirmation, that you are on the right track. Maybe it will be a word of comfort: "You are my child and I love you. All will be well." But maybe that voice is telling you a hard truth, that the better choice is the harder choice, that you said a hurtful word, or you were insensitive to your friend, or you need to let go of that cherished idea of yours. Are you willing to hear what God has to say to you if what God says is uncomfortable?

But then again, who else do you want to hear from, besides Oprah? Surely whatever God speaks is just what needs to be said. Surely what God tells you will not lead you astray. Surely God's word is a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path.

Just keep in mind that God decides when God will speak and what God will speak. You can be still and listen for that voice but there is no guarantee that God will speak to you. And you certainly can't dictate to God what you want God to say. Just as we are free to speak or remain silent, so God is free. Also, sometimes God speaks without words. What

I mean is, sometimes things are said without words. A feeling says something. Being together says something. There's a story about two elderly monks who met for an hour. They said nothing to each other. They simply sat together in silence. Then, after the hour passed, they parted company. They just wanted to be in each other's company. That was enough. And so maybe just sitting for a while in God's company without speaking is enough.

Be assured that what God speaks into your heart is truth. God is the fount of all truth. Know that whatever God speaks into your heart comes from a place of love and compassion, for God is love. And know that whatever God speaks into your heart is a word of hope for our God is the God of all hope.

I believe God can speak to us through poetry. I want to end with this poem by Andrew King entitled "The One Whose Heart is Searching". I invite you to still your mind and listen to these beautiful images, and see if it speaks to your heart.

Samuel on his bed beside the lamp,
its flame describing in slow pulses
the flickering hope
of a lonely, quiet yearning;
the hollow stillness
like a silent pond where
a searching voice could be heard
like a dropping pebble.
And in the dark and in the emptiness
the One who is doing the calling,
the One whose heart is searching,
is the unheard God.

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Nathanael on the ground
under the fig tree, looking
up through its leaves at
an empty sky.

The leaves sift the sunlight,
its harshness is filtered,
but the shade over his soul
shows little gleam of joy.
His heart nearly closed
in its quest for truth,
his horizons have dimmed,
no corners of hope discerned.
But there is One who
remains watching and looking,
and the One who is searching for him
is the unrecognized God.

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You and me on our beds,
our couches, you and me by our lamps.
You and me under spreading trees,
or peering at the sky through windows;
you and me at our office desks,
fingering the plastic of keyboards;
you and me in our living-rooms,
or sitting at our kitchen tables;
you and me, so yearning for hope,
so longing for meaning, truth, or joy –
may we become aware of the One
who is searching for us;
awake to the One
who knows and calls our names
longing for us to listen:
the God of promise and of invitation.