

“Are We Listening?”
Genesis 11:27 -12:9, Acts 9:1-9; Mark 1:16-20
May 5, 2019

Having been out sick Tuesday through Friday this week, I was pretty lucky that my sermon was 90% completed last Monday - everything except these opening paragraphs, in fact. But when I got back to the Parsonage Saturday morning, I had seven phone messages waiting for me. There's a price to pay for time away from one's desk, I guess. Of course, a full half dozen messages were from telemarketers, who didn't have anything to say that I wanted to listen to anyways, while the seventh caller also had my home phone and reached me there. And by the way, please do not hesitate to call me at home, 24/7. You're not intruding!

Our modern telecommunications have certainly changed how we can get in touch with each other. Caller ID lets us screen calls; it's almost revenge enough for the ineffectiveness of our Do-Not-Call lists. We can use phone numbers to send a text message, in which case we don't even have to use our voice to get our message across. And, they even tell me that there are phones that are not connected to landlines (wonders never cease!), except that don't work in the center of Colebrook, of course.

In the world of the church, we sometimes use normal, everyday words, such as “call,” to describe a different kind of reality. Long before Alexander Graham Bell made his first call, God had been at it for thousands of years. And some of our ancestors were listening.

Most people think that calls are for ministers only. In other words, only saints need apply - never mind that most ministers I've run into haven't been “saint” material. But, only saints can hear, and listen to, the voice of God - right? In biblical days they didn't talk about ministers, of course, but spoke of the same kind of people as prophets, or something old-fashioned like that. Some churches still use some old, traditional language, speaking of priests - they, too, receive calls from God. Presumably they heard. And listened.

But could common, everyday people hear and listen to the call of God? Do they today? Most of us are skeptical on that question. Like winning the lottery or getting cancer, being able to hear calls from God happens only to other people, or so it is thought. And as a result most people, heaving a sigh of relief that God would never require anything of them - certainly nothing terribly heroic or self-sacrificing - might not even recognize a call from God if it actually did come over the telephone, courtesy of AT&T or SNET or Bell or whoever is doing the honors for our corner of the country.

Why can't normal, everyday people hear God, feel God, experience God prompting, urging, moving souls to carry out some special task? Maybe God shares the prejudice of George Bernard Shaw, who once said, "I have never had any feeling for the working classes, except a desire to abolish them, and replace them by sensible people." Somehow I'm glad that George Bernard Shaw didn't become God; we all would have been a lot worse off. Perhaps Abraham Lincoln came a bit closer to the truth about God's views of humanity, when he observed, speaking of himself, no doubt: "God must love the common man; he made so many of them."

When we look at scripture to see whom God called, the answer is a mixed bag. This morning we read of Abram, of Saul, of Simon and Andrew and James and John. Who were these people?

Abram, at the point where he is introduced in the Old Testament, is just another name in another list of "begats." Even after his life had been touched by God, he is found out to be a deceitful liar who tolerates unsavory behavior in his own clan (of which he is the head). In the end, Abram is the possessor of many divine promises, with virtually none of them fulfilled. In other words, if God called him, Abram had precious little to show for it.

Moving to the New Testament we find Saul who, by contrast, has a good education, has attained some kind of position of responsibility, and is very efficient at his work. Today he might be considered a golden boy, one of the best and the brightest,

carrying all the right tickets in life. Never mind that he was an intolerant bigot. As it turns out, God could work with that.

The last four characters we met this morning were your basic, normal peasant types. Unlike Abram, they would not rise to rule over a clan. Unlike Saul, they would never go to all the right schools. Simon would prove to be something of a hot-head, James followed in his brother's shadow well out of the spotlight, Andrew was just one of the lads, while John turned out to be something of a teacher's pet.

So what was it that singles these six individuals out? Some of them would stand out in a crowd, others would blend in with the background. Some had the world by the horns, others probably didn't know there was a world beyond their village. Yet believe it or not, there was something in common that all of these persons shared, though we might not realize it at first.

From what we can tell, Saul was a sworn enemy of the Lord - though he didn't ever think of himself that way. Abram, by contrast, was already moving in the Lord's direction, both literally and figuratively. And our four fishermen? Their ideas about God were probably very simple, if not superstitious. But in all these cases, we see a picture of dynamic people, on the move, not ready to be defeated or fatigued by life and whatever life had to throw at them.

Think of Abram. He first moves from his hometown of Ur to the city of Haran, and from Haran to Canaan, the land of the Promise. The first move was on his own. The second move came in his response to Divine initiative. Abram was listening. And Abram, it seems, had it kind of easy: he was already moving God's way. Just another little nudge and Abram's will would be, effectively, in harmony with God's.

Saul, who later became Paul, was just the opposite. Something had to happen to make him spin around 180 degrees and head off in a direction completely opposite to where he had been going. We now generally refer to it as a Bolt from the Blue. In more biblical language, we talk about having a Road to Damascus experience.

Were our fishermen, by contrast, just marking time? At first blush, so it might seem. But somehow, Someone “up there” knew that it was their skills as fishers of fish that would stand them in good stead as fishers of men. Again, God could work with that.

As we are told in the New Testament, we will be set upon by many conflicting voices as we go through life, begging for our attention, demanding a hearing, to be listened to. Some will be the voices of conscience, others the voices of inner despair. We will hear counsel from supposed friends that would lead us to destruction, while from the most unlikely sources, as from the mouths of babes, will we receive gems.

Scripture teaches us not to accept all of these promptings uncritically. Rather, we are to “test the spirits” to see if there is any truth in them.

So if we think that God may be trying to make the divine will known in and for our lives, we are to reflect upon it. Reflect on our personal situation and on the truths which faith, hope, and love bring to enlighten us. If we are troubled, talk matters over with a friend, a family member, a trusted confidant. Rare is the time when a voice will come booming, loud and clear, saying, “Thus saith the Lord.” And even if it did, you would still have to determine whether or not it really was God speaking.

It is not an easy task, seeking this inner meaning to supposed words from on high. But if we look at Abram and Saul, at Simon and Andrew, at James and John, we might very well conclude that the effort, and the response, can be well worth the effort.

For the good of listening comes in harmonizing our lives with the One who, in love, seeks nothing but the best for us. For the joy in believing comes in responding to the need for truth, for justice, and for mercy. Indeed, the peace that passes all understanding will be ours as we walk in the light, in the very footsteps of the stranger of Galilee, who would seek to be stranger to us no longer, but to lead us into fellowship with each other in the name of our Father.

Let us pray: