

Sermon Rev Jo Smith January 14th 2024

There is a bittersweet joke sometimes heard in church circles. When someone proclaims that “God is still speaking,” usually someone responds with a bit of irony, “But is anyone listening?”

As Anglicans we like to be fairly rational, oriented toward social action like many other mainstream denominations, and we get a bit suspicious about mystical experiences and spiritual practices, like visions and talking in tongues. We really don't want to talk about our prayer life with each other....that's personal. We don't want to talk about experiencing God. But I think it might be good for us to talk about how we experience God in our lives.

Today's scriptures focus on listening for the voice of God and God's movements within our lives. God is constantly speaking in our lives through insights, encounters, hunches, dreams, bursts of energy, and inspirational thoughts. Our calling is to listen to the many voices of God, often hidden in everyday experience, and then follow God's guidance, shaping our encounters with God in our own unique ways.

Young Samuel hears a voice in the night. He assumes that it's the voice of his mentor, the priest Eli. Eli, however, tells Samuel to listen for another's voice, the voice of the Holy One of Israel. The third time Samuel hears the voice whispering in the darkness, Samuel responds, “Speak, God, your servant is listening.” Perhaps Samuel's response can serve as a model for our own spiritual formation. In the midst of our busyness and self-interest, our daily prayers should include a plea that we listen to God's whisperings in our lives. Our prayer is answered by our willingness to pause and be still to heighten our awareness of the divine voice.

Because divine providence is profoundly concrete and historical, listening for God's voice is also profoundly concrete. God's creative presence in our lives is related to God's awareness of our lives. This is central to the reading from Psalm 139. "Search me and know me," the Psalmist prays. We are known completely by God. Everything we do matters to God. God's knowledge of us is grounded in his love for us. God's knowledge of us and his creative action in our lives is one beautiful movement. God has moved through our lives from the moment of conception. To be known by God is to discover oneself as loved by God. God's knowledge of us is not threatening, but enlightening and transforming.

So when we hear the words from 1 Corinthians today, hear them in that light. The words of 1 Corinthians 6 combine ethics, anthropology (what it means to be human), and theology. In the wake of Christmas, there is an incarnational element in this scripture. The incarnation proclaims the dignity of the physical world and the goodness of our bodies. Wherever God dwells is holy. Accordingly, our bodies are the temple of God's spirit. Accordingly, our embodiment has moral implications. The body is inspired, and the spirit embodied. Indeed, our bodies should be treated with honor and respect. The bodies of others matter, too. Anything that objectifies others fails to see the spiritual wholeness of each person, including us.

And the ethical implications of the body as God's temple go beyond sexuality. We cannot separate cells and souls in any sphere of life. Do we care for the bodies of others by ensuring that they have sufficient food, shelter, and safety to fully incarnate the divine image? Do we care for the bodies of others by providing safe working conditions and living wages? Do we care for our own bodies by healthy eating, Sabbath (holy) rest, centering prayer and meditation, and appropriate exercise? Do we speak out against anything that reduces persons to bodies and consumers? As T.S.

Eliot counsels in “For the Time Being,” we are to love God in the world of the flesh, our own flesh and the flesh of others.

In the Gospel reading, after encountering Jesus, Philip invites Nathaniel to become part of the Jesus movement. “Come and see,” Philip tells his brother. Sharing good news is about inviting others to share in the joys we have experienced. Philip does not disguise his joy at encountering Jesus; he lets his light shine. His invitation is welcoming, not coercive. He shares his experience, not doctrine or theology. He wants his friend to experience the life-changing truth he has encountered. Nathaniel’s affirmation of faith emerges in his encounter with Jesus. Good news is embodied in the person of Jesus – his words, deeds, and presence. Good news is also embodied in us – our words, deeds, and presence. Our hospitality is the greatest testimony to the love of God and the welcoming spirit of our congregation.

God is constantly speaking, and occasionally in words. The church is challenged to be a place of listening, sharing, and supporting, fully committed to a whole person mission. When we experience God’s presence, our calling is to share the good news we’ve received.