

“Answering The Call”

January 22nd, 2017
Sun./Epiphany

Isaiah 9:1-7

Matthew 4:12-25

And going on from there he saw two other brothers,

James the son of Zeb'edee and John his brother, in the boat with Zeb'edee their father,

mending their nets, and he called them.

Matthew 4:21

Let us pray... O God,

Speak to us in our time and this place, so we may not only know you better,
but help in your healing work of salvation.

Amen

It is amazing and amusing to visualize how James and John
just drop everything to follow Jesus.

This suggests that their first impression of Jesus was so compelling
that they immediately abandoned their work and relationships –
to go along with a stranger.

That doesn't seem prudent – let alone responsible behavior
as an example for Christians to follow.

So, more than likely, Peter and Andrew, James and John
all had previous opportunities to hear Jesus teach and preach.

Still, the text tells us that all of them 'immediately' dropped what they were doing
when Jesus called them and said, 'Follow me!'

This narrative reminds me of scenes from the film, “Dead Poets Society”,
where a charismatic English teacher encourages his teenage students to
'seize the day' and 'make your lives extraordinary'.

I'm inclined to imagine that the disciples were like these impressionable teenagers
or young men, who were politically involved if not formally educated.

Peter and Andrew themselves were entrepreneurs as fishermen with their own boat,
but they would have been living in anxiety because of King Herod Antipas'
monopoly of the fishing industry at the Sea of Galilee.

According to theologian Dominic Crossan,

Herod' taxed the fishermen, the boatwrights, the processors, and distributors
of salted fish in order to support his political agenda and
make a name for himself among his Roman overlords.

At the time, John the Baptist was calling people to repent and to be baptized
in preparation for when God would act to save captive Israel *in their time*.

John's baptisms were meant to imitate how God carried the Hebrews
through the waters of the Red Sea to escape the Egyptians
and become a community of God's children.

Willard, p.2

However, Jesus proclaimed that such a community exists now
and we are called – not to wait, but to participate in the building up
of God’s Kingdom of Heaven as an achievable social reality.

What is that ‘call’ these days?

How do we know when it is God who is calling?

About 600 years after Moses’ time, the Prophet Elijah was on the run
from Ahab the unjust ruler of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

In his desperation, Elijah hid in a cave in the Sinai wilderness.

There were violent events of an earthquake, a windstorm, and a storm of fire –
but it was through a ‘still, small voice’ that Elijah recognized the voice of God.

What this suggests is that the voice of God is heard even among
the most quiet voices – and where is such a voice most likely to be?

Ironically, it is among the voices that are the most likely to be ignored:
the voice of the ‘least of these’ – the minority in our midst.

As Jesus said,

“When you have done it for the least of these, you have done it for me” and

“When you have neglected the least of these, you have neglected me.”

So, we can make the connection that the call of God
is the urgent cry of those in need.

But how do we know that cry is legitimate? How do we ‘vet’ real need?

Certainly, professionals are trained to help people who are impoverished
and homeless, or face serious threats to their health,
or have children at risk in such circumstances.

Yet too often people on the margins are written off as opportunists
who could otherwise be working, and welfare is just a form of socialism.

Though there *are* people who play the system,
pre-judgment of such efforts overall ignores the legitimate problems
of people and their families.

Their cry is to be discovered in how *you* would feel in their situation.

As you listen for and hear others’ hopes for justice, acceptance, good health,
opportunity, mutuality, respect, forgiveness, and love...

you can see your own concerns echoed in their humanity.

The Golden Rule – “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”
challenges us to recognize our own joys & concerns
being like those of somebody else who is in need.

Willard, p.3

That voice is being heard this weekend through people like Kamala Harris, a new senator from California, who like others at the Women's March in Washington, DC along with women gathered for Women's Marches throughout the world, have made their cries for justice heard with concern that women's issues are specifically threatened. But this is not just about abortion or equal pay – but national security, healthcare, immigration reform, climate change, student debt, crime, and black lives, too as issues that women are concerned about, which are issues that concern us all.

Again from the story of Exodus, God calls Moses to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt, because God heard their cry as it says in Exodus 2:23-24^a...
*And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God.
And God heard their groaning...*

God would answer that cry and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt with a strong hand.

Yet even then, this saving action still called for human beings to get involved, lend a hand themselves, and help make their salvation happen. God pushed back the waters of the Red Sea with a powerful wind, but that still meant for Moses to lift up his rod and stretch out his arm, for the Hebrews to see him and take courage – enough to step out into the midst of the sea, on ground that was still wet...

As a congregation, you have been willing to listen for that still, small voice to give us clues where that Kingdom of Heaven is in our midst. We are a "5 For 5" church supporting the UCC's special giving funds, and we continue to support the Wildwood Food Pantry and Thrift Store. We continue to participate in interfaith activities with Temple Shalom and ISLAM, Inc. along with our community's quarterly Prayer Service for Peace, our cooperative ministry with the UU for the "3 Kings" festival, our Harvest Sunday outreach to the farmworkers of Calle de Milagros' Resurrection House, our Creative Arts project at Wildwood Elementary School, as well as our Epic Reading series with Young Performing Artists, Inc. of Royal in Wildwood.

We have a very strong outward-oriented mission – that makes a statement to our Villages community, challenging conservatives to some extent, to see there are progressive options, demonstrating belief in a compassionate and creative God 'through Christ'. Even those opposed to our ONA ways can still find reason to admire us thanks to our Marketing Team and fair-minded local media.

Willard, p.4

Above all, we are listening for the still, small voice of church members in our midst,
for their 'joys & the concerns' as we fine tune for that beloved community
that is possible here at the United Church of Christ at The Villages.
We do that through our network of Shepherds, Minister of Visitation, Parish Nurse,
our Kitchen crew "ministry of hospitality", fundraising and fellowship.

As it is written in Isaiah 9:6 – a verse associated with the Season of Advent:

A child has been born for us.

We have been given a son who will be our ruler.

His names will be Wonderful Advisor and Mighty God,

Eternal Father and Prince of Peace.

Jesus first spoke as a helpless child crying for his mother like we all did –
and still cry out to God for help.

That is the clue for where 'God is still speaking' –
wherever there is a need.

By the way, thanks to the Women's March, we can all call Congress
and help them listen for God's 'stillspeaking' voice

about where the needs still are by dialing 202-225-3121

Amen

*Our lesson today from Isaiah 9:1-7 is a reminder that despite
Israel's violent history there has always been the promise
of a just community.*

*The promise of a wise Counselor or Adviser
is a reminder that it is still our responsibility to help justice happen...*

- ¹But those who have suffered will no longer be in pain.
The territories of Zebulun and Naphtali in Galilee were once hated.
But this land of the Gentiles across the Jordan River
and along the Mediterranean Sea will be greatly respected.
- ²Those who walked in the dark have seen a bright light.
And it shines upon everyone who lives in the land of darkest shadows.
- ³Our LORD, you have made your nation stronger.
Because of you, its people are glad and celebrate
like workers at harvest time
or like soldiers dividing up what they have taken.
- ⁴You have broken the power of those who abused and enslaved your people.
You have rescued them just as you saved your people from Midian.
- ⁵The boots of marching warriors and the blood-stained uniforms
have been fed to flames and eaten by fire.
- ⁶A child has been born for us. We have been given a son who will be our ruler.
His names will be Wonderful Advisor and Mighty God,
Eternal Father and Prince of Peace.
- ⁷His power will never end; peace will last forever.
He will rule David's kingdom and make it grow strong.
He will always rule with honesty and justice.
The LORD All-Powerful will make certain that all of this is done.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Matthew 4:12-25

¹² Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee;

¹³ and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Caper'na-um by the sea,
in the territory of Zeb'ulun and Naph'tali,

¹⁴ that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ "The land of Zeb'ulun and the land of Naph'tali,
toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned."

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying,

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers,

Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea;
for they were fishermen.

¹⁹ And he said to them,

"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men [and women]."

²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers,

James the son of Zeb'edee and John his brother,
in the boat with Zeb'edee their father, mending their nets,
and he called them.

²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³ And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues

and preaching the gospel of the kingdom

and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people.

²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick,

those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics,
and paralytics, and he healed them.

²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decap'olis

and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan.