



Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A man goes to the doctor, concerned about his wife's hearing. The doctor says, "Stand behind her and say something and tell me how close you are when she hears you." The man goes home, sees his wife in the kitchen, cutting carrots on the countertop. About 15 feet away he says, "Honey, what's for dinner?" Nothing. He gets halfway to her and repeats the same question. Nothing. Very concerned, he gets right behind her and asks again "What's for dinner?"

She turns around and says "For the THIRD time, beef stew!"

We've probably all had trouble hearing at times, some of us more than others, but our Gospel text this morning presents us with a special case of hearing: the times when we are trying to hear God. In some ways, Matthew makes hearing God look simple. God walks by in the flesh as the man Jesus, he says "follow me", and Simon, Andrew, James, and John hear his voice, leave their boats, and follow him.

Matthew doesn't really give us any background or context to the lives of these men and so his story seems to imply that this was the first time they'd ever met Jesus and that they immediately responded to his call. But I'm inclined to think that Matthew is giving a very abbreviated version of events. As we heard last Sunday, John tries to flesh the story out more by telling us that Simon and Andrew were already disciples of John the Baptist before they met Jesus and that John's testimony was part of their inspiration to follow Jesus.

So, it seems reasonable to assume that these men had heard Jesus preach, seen him and talked with him, and knew that something new and different was happening with Jesus. They had probably been wrestling with what to do and how to respond to Jesus for days, or maybe even weeks, before this pivotal moment of calling took place – a moment that led them to walk away from everything they had known and follow Jesus into the unknown.

For us it raises a question: how do we know when God is calling us to something? Since Jesus is resurrected and ascended to heaven we don't expect him to walk by while we're at work one day and just say "follow me." Yet Jesus does make his presence known to us, he does from time to time ask us to act or think differently, and we do want to learn to be more sensitive to hearing his voice when he speaks. Allow me to suggest three keys to hearing God:

1. Openness. It only makes sense that if we're going to hear God's voice we have to be open to the idea that there is a God and that he cares enough about us to talk to us. If we walking around with our heads full of other voices – voices that say God is impersonal, distant, or uncaring then we are not open to what God might want to say to us or do in our lives. The life and message of Jesus calls us to be open to the idea of God as loving parent who will speak and work in our lives to bring about positive changes.

2. Silence. By that I mean our own silence. Again and again the scriptures and the stories of our faith point us to the reality that God rarely forces himself into our lives. Even the story of Moses at the burning bush is preceded by many years of Moses tending his sheep in the vast silence of the wilderness. As we'll see in a few weeks, even Jesus' ministry began with 40 days of fasting in the silence of the wilderness.

It is not necessary for us to actually leave our homes and go live in the woods to experience the silence of the wilderness in which God speaks. It is necessary, though, that we learn to create an inward place of silence and emptiness within ourselves. It is necessary that we learn to be able to go into the quiet wilderness of our souls even if our bodies remain at home.

What, exactly, does this look like? It looks like simple actions: turn off the TV, put down the cell phone, stop worrying about what the doctor will say next Friday, and quiet your mind. Not for just 30 seconds or a minute, but for as long as you can. Give yourself permission to worry or work or browse the web thirty minutes or an hour or a day from now. For now, in this moment, choose to let your world become silent. In fact, we can practice that for just a few moments right now. [Set a timer and try doing nothing for 2 minutes.]

How did that feel? It's a bit strange isn't it? What the deeply spiritual people of history tell us is that the more we practice silence the easier it becomes. And the more we practice it the more appreciate it, enjoy it, and even come to long for it.

3. A willingness to listen to jackasses. You probably remember the story of Balaam's donkey in the Hebrew Scriptures: Balaam was a magician who was on his way to pronounce a curse on the Israelites when the

donkey he was riding stopped in the road and wouldn't move forward. An angel was blocking the path – the donkey could see it but Balaam couldn't. Finally, after Balaam had beaten and sworn at the animal to try to get him moving again, God empowered the donkey to speak and the jackass explained to Balaam what was going on.

Something similar will sometimes happen in our lives. We are practicing silence, we are listening for God's voice, and the calling of God will come to us through unexpected people and circumstances. Sometimes God will speak to us through the people we least want God to use for that purpose and yet the message will be clear. In fact, I think God sometimes intentionally speaks through people we don't like or circumstances we don't enjoy in order to startle us out of our routine and awaken us to the reality of what he is doing in our lives.

My prayer for myself, for you, and for us as a church, is that we would be open to God, practicing silence, and ready to hear God's voice no matter how he chooses to speak to us. Like the disciples in today's story, may we be ready to hear, and ready to follow, Jesus' calling in our lives.

Amen.