

GOD'S SURPRISING CALL

"What if God were one of us?" That's the question asked by a television show called "Joan of Arcadia." I think I may have mentioned that show a few weeks ago. It's about a young girl who hears the voice of God in the voices of ordinary people.

I guess the show is popular because it taps into a deep human need. People have always wanted to hear the voice of God, and we are no exception.

So, where can we hear God's voice? Is God one of us? What would God say to us if we could hear God clearly?

In this season of the church year called Epiphany, we are especially concerned with the God who is revealed in Christ Jesus. We believe that God did become one of us in His Son, Jesus.

But, we also believe that this God who revealed Himself in Jesus is not the one whom we expect Him to be. I believe that is always the case.

The voice of God is always a surprise. And that mysterious voice always brings a word of judgment, a word of grace and a word of challenge. (Sounds like the classic three point sermon!)

First, let's consider God's voice as a word of judgment.

JUDGMENT

I ran across that old joke last week in which Billy Graham supposedly has a press conference. He tells the reporters, "I have some good news and some bad news." "Give us the good news first," one reporter shouted. Graham replied, "I heard from God last night."

The reporters are excited at such a pronouncement from a famous preacher such as this, and they quickly ask, "So what's the bad news." Billy's eyebrows furrow as he says in that deep voice of his, "God's real mad."

Suppose that's true? Suppose God's real mad? Suppose the voice of God judges something that we are doing and saying?

I heard a tape of Martin Luther King this past week in which he was being critical of our nation's foreign policy. King said something like,

"I have listened for God's voice on this matter, and I think I hear God saying that our country has become too arrogant. We too often use power to get our own way, and if we do not change our ways, I believe that God will judge us, that God will take away our power."

I had forgotten how confrontational and disturbing Dr. King's messages could be. It is not easy to hear that perhaps we are not all that we should be and could be. We want to say positive things about who we are as a people and as a country.

But, suppose there's a hard message that God wants to deliver to us? Who wants to deliver a message like that? I'll tell you. No one.

The message of judgment is a hard message to bring because it condemns the messenger as well as the audience. That is obvious in our first Scripture lesson from the prophet Isaiah.

JUDGMENT IN ISAIAH

Isaiah was worshipping in the temple, and suddenly the familiar was transformed into the heavenly. Can you imagine what that would be like?

Can you imagine what it would be like to have the voices of our choir suddenly replaced by the sound of heavenly angels? Can you imagine what it would be like to have the sanctuary fill with smoke and see a vision of God that is so overwhelming that you cannot even describe it?

What would your reaction be?

I think our reaction would be the same as Isaiah's. We'd want to run away and hide!

When Isaiah saw God "high and lifted up," Isaiah responded to that vision by replying, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

The call of God always involves an element of judgment. If you have not heard a word of judgment, you have not heard from God.

Hearing the voice of God will always cause us to confront things in our lives that we do not want to confront.

Our other Scripture lessons also touch upon this sense of judgment and being overwhelmed by the power and presence of God.

JUDGMENT IN LUKE

In Luke's gospel Jesus tells the disciples and Simon Peter to "put out into deep water and let their nets down for a catch." Now you need to know that these were experienced fishermen who had been hard at work all night with no success.

Peter once again seems to be mildly rebuking Jesus when he says, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

So, they did as Jesus said, and the results were amazing. They caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break and their boats began to sink.

It was at this point that Simon Peter began to understand that this wasn't really about fishing at all. This was about the power of God being revealed in Jesus.

How did Peter react? The Scripture tells us that he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

The presence of God in Jesus filled Peter with a sense of dread and knowledge of his own sinfulness.

JUDGMENT IN CORINTHIANS

There is also a sense of God's judgment in Paul's letter to the Corinthians as well.

Paul is encouraging the believers in Corinth to remain steadfast to the heart of the gospel. The heart of the gospel, according to the apostle, is the fact of the resurrection of Christ.

Paul lists the many witnesses to the resurrection. Peter, the apostles, and a crowd of over 500 people saw the glory of God in the resurrected Christ.

“Finally,” says Paul, “the risen Christ appeared to me, as one abnormally born. I don’t deserve to be called an apostle. I am the least of the apostles because I persecuted the church of God.”

Throughout the letters of Paul, we hear this reoccurring theme. I believe that Paul had a deep a sense of sin and regret throughout his entire life.

In the letter to the Philippians Paul said that he considered all that he had accomplished before he came to know Christ to be nothing but garbage. (Philippians 3:8)

All of his credentials as a scholar and religious leader meant nothing in the grand scheme of things.

Judgment was a very personal thing for the apostle who was blinded by the sight of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

Paul could not avoid the road to Damascus,
Peter could not avoid Jesus’ command to fish in deep water,
and Isaiah could not avoid the vision in the temple.

Many of us, like Peter wish Jesus would go somewhere else so that we wouldn’t have to be confronted by the hard facts about who we are,

but that is never possible.

HEALING SCARS

Almost always we first experience the voice of God through this terrible insight. We suddenly understand that our life is not what it should be. Like Paul, all of us have regrets that stay with us our entire life. The wounds may heal over and become scars, but the scars are there to remind us nonetheless.

We are less than we should be.
We are indeed a people of unclean lips.

I was talking with a friend this past week about psychological wounds from the past, old scars, and he said that, for him a scar is a good thing. A scar is, in fact, stronger than the skin it replaces. It doesn’t hurt like an open wound. But, it does serve as a reminder of what happened before.

When I first started woodworking, I forgot the first rule of the shop, “Always cut away from you.” So, I took a sharp chisel and cut a groove in my hand just below my right thumb. It didn’t require stitches, but it did require a trip to the emergency room and a tetanus shot.

From time to time I look at that scar and remember the lesson, “Cut away from you when using a chisel!” Believe me. There are many times when I get impatient or in a hurry that I still need to remember that lesson.

I see the judgment of God in the same way. God's presence does make us aware of our sinful ways. We are judged by the voice and presence of God.

But, God uses that judgment to heal instead of harm. God does not reopen old wounds. God uses those old scars as a way to keep us humble and focused on where we need to go.

In the Bible we read these words about Jesus,
"By his wounds we are healed." (1 Peter 2:24)

In other words, by the wounds of Jesus, we are forgiven and freed to live a new life. But, it seems to me that, in a smaller way, the same is true for us as well. By our wounds, we are healed.

In God's hands the wounds of the past become scars, sources of healing and hope instead of pain.

It is possible to let our judgment become a way of understanding the grace of God more fully and conveying that grace to others.

JUDGMENT LEADS TO GRACE

That leads us to the second point of our three point sermon. God's judgment leads to grace.

Notice what happened to Isaiah when he was overwhelmed by a sense of sinfulness in the presence of God. God sent his servant to graciously remove the prophet's overwhelming sense of sin. We read in our first lesson from Isaiah,

[6] Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. [7] The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."
Isaiah 6:6-7 (NRSV)

You'll notice that the same thing happens in our second lesson for today as well. Peter in the face of the power of God as displayed by Jesus is beside himself with fear and a sense of sinfulness. He is on his knees asking Jesus to leave.

But, Jesus doesn't leave. Jesus reaches out to Peter with the hope of transformation. Jesus told Peter,
"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Luke 5:10 (NRSV)

Fearful Peter would become a "fisher of men and women," a bold spokesman for the gospel. It would be a long hard struggle, and the fear would never leave him entirely.

But, Peter would, by the grace of God become a different person. He would become as Jesus once predicted, a person who lived up to his name. He would become a rock like person who would become a foundation stone for the church.

And the same thing happens to the apostle Paul. Though he persecuted the church of God and though he didn't deserve to be called an apostle, yet God transformed Paul into one who was arguably the most effective preacher of the gospel the church has ever known. Paul wrote,

[10] But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them--though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 1 Corinthians 15:10 (NRSV)

Are you overwhelmed with a sense of sin and unworthiness? Perhaps the voice of God is calling you home. Perhaps God is using this awareness of your sin as a way of reaching out and touching you and making you whole. Perhaps God is using your pain as a way to bring healing and hope.

We may think (perhaps with some justification) that we are not worthy to be in God's presence. But, maybe God doesn't want to give up on us. Maybe God wants to work a miracle of grace in our life.

Maybe God wants to use our dissatisfaction as an opportunity to change us into the person He wants us to be.

GRACE LEADS TO A CHALLENGE

I believe this is always the case. The judgment of God leads us to grace. And the grace of God leads us to (point three in our three point sermon) a challenge.

God's call is not just a word of judgment and forgiveness. The voice of God also brings us a challenge, a new way of life and a new job to do.

Again, we can see this movement clearly in all three of our lessons from Scripture.

Isaiah's sense of sin is removed by God's forgiveness, and it is at this point that Isaiah hears the voice of God say, "Whom shall I send? Who shall go for us?" And Isaiah, no longer discouraged by a sense of shame and unworthiness in the presence of God is able to reply, "Here am I. Send me."

In the gospel lesson we see the same story. Peter is overwhelmed by the power of Jesus. He wants Jesus to leave him. But, instead, Jesus in grace calls Peter to leave behind his fear and follow him.

Peter and the other disciples do just that. In verse 11 we read,

[11] When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. Luke 5:11 (NRSV)

I've always thought that we don't really appreciate the import of that statement. The disciples left everything in order to follow Jesus. Service in the name of Jesus became more important than fishing, than just "making a living."

Can we say the same is true of us?

It's interesting the stories I heard as a member of Presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry. Over and over again a person would describe how he or she tried to avoid doing what they definitely heard God calling them to do. But, finally they relented and gave in to the call of God to become a pastor.

Of course we are not all called to become a pastor, but we are all called to be ministers. Each and every one of us has a special job to do for the kingdom of God.

And each and every one of us at least to a certain extent is reluctant to respond to that call because it will mean leaving behind some part of our life that we would prefer to keep.

Think about that. What are you holding onto that keeps you from being all that God would have you be? Is making a living or doing what you want to do so important that you can't hear God calling you to the joy of a new life?

RESURRECTION POWER FOR TODAY

Paul in our lesson from Corinthians encourages us to receive and pass along the message of the resurrection that Jesus died and rose again from the dead.

But, the resurrection is not just about what happened then and therenor is it just about something that will happen to us some time in the future after we die.

The doctrine of the resurrection teaches us that there is power and promise in every moment of every day. The doctrine of the resurrection is something that helps us stand for that which is right when we feel like our world is falling down. (1 Corinthians 15:1)

The doctrine of the resurrection gives us hope to try when it seems like nothing works. The doctrine of the resurrection calls us to leave behind our fear and cast off into the deep water with Jesus.

I would invite you this day to make the connection between the biblical story and your own story. No matter what your weakness or need I believe that God is graciously calling us to go forward in His name.

May God help us hear His voice. May we be filled this day with grace and power.

Amen.