

Sermon

In the Midst of Many Voices

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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I don't know about you but this time of year is difficult for me. I tend to leave for work around 6:30 am sometimes even earlier and the other day as I arrived, settled in my office when I looked out the window, it was still dark out. I leave around 4:30 and when I arrive home, it is usually dark out again. And the in between times lately haven't been much better -it's been pretty gray and dreary and it does effect my mood. I get tired easily, a little grumpy, less patience. Now I can't blame it all on the gray days of winter...some of it is related to the time of year – after the excitement of Christmas, things are a little boring.

Well our scripture from Isaiah talks about this light from God. And in these short days of winter, I really appreciate how important light can be. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light – those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.” This light is different than our days getting a bit longer, our daylight expanding by minutes each week. No, Isaiah is talking about a sudden bright dawn. As when you turn a light on to illuminate a dark path and suddenly shadows are gone and the path becomes clear.

We all seek this, not just from God but from every aspect of our lives. We long for a clear path – a voice that will tell us which direction to go both in our personal lives and in our spiritual lives. How do you discern the voice of God in

your life? I don't ask that knowing I have the answer. I ask it because I'm genuinely curious. So...let's talk about that.

First, we all come to a point at times where we are exhausted, frustrated, or just plain burned out. Happens to me – I'm sure it happens to you. But I was raised to keep going. It's your responsibility...despite being tired, spiritually worn out, or just confused – we have obligations – perhaps employment obligations – family, friends, and of course church. But sometimes God calls us to new things – or just reassures us that its ok to take a break or try something new. Now, taking a new path-well sometimes that bright light hasn't yet been turned on. There still shadows and obstacles of the unknown but as I said earlier in the year, the door may be open but we know not yet what is on the other side. We just know that God has opened the door.

Our Gospel from Matthew illustrates how these callings look sometimes. First we find John's been arrested simply for following Jesus. For leading the flock to this wonderful teacher – this Messiah who threatens the powers of the day...and other voices come into play. So Jesus knows he needs to find his helpers, his disciples...he's got a long journey ahead of him. So he comes upon Simon called Peter and Andrew and then James and his brother John. The metaphor of fishing is not lost on us.

Rodger Y. Nishioka, from Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur Georgia, wrote a beautiful commentary on this passage and I have to share this with you. He mentions Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom which ran from 1963 to 1988 and was on each Sunday evening. I watched it every week and will probably

never forget the sound of the great Marlin Perkins (the host's) voice. Nichioka writes about his experience and memory of one particular episode. "One episode I remember fondly was about the elephant seals of Argentina. The show focused on a mother and her seal pup, who had just been born. Soon after birthing her baby, the mother, now famished, abandoned the pup on the shore so she could go feed in the right waters off the coast. After feeding, she returned to a different part of the beach and began to call for her baby. Other mothers had done the same, and all had returned at a similar time; I remember thinking they would never find one another. The camera then followed the mother as she called to her pup and listened for the response." Now if you're like me, your heart is beating faster at this point – the thought of a mother and baby not being able to find each other is heart wrenching! "Following each other's voices and scents, soon the mother and pup were reunited. The host explained that, from the moment of birth, the sound and scent of the pup are imprinted in the mother's memory, and the sound and scent of the mother are imprinted in the pup's memory."

He continues..."And this is how it is with us too. We are imprinted with a memory of God and God with us and even if it takes a lifetime we will find each other."

Discerning our call can be extremely challenging in a world with so many voices coming at us each and every day. Experts that tell us what we should do at each stage of our lives, even friends and family who do the same. Financial planners, educational advisors, employers, spouses, children, parents and

celebrities who have much more influence than they should. So I ask the question again, How do you discern the voice of God in your life in the midst of so many voices? How can you be sure it is God? I wish the task of discernment was as easy as it was for the elephant seal and in some ways it is but in other ways its much more complicated. Our scripture from Matthew does not end...and so they followed Jesus...no, it ends, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” And I think this is a testament to us when it comes to who and what we follow. It’s almost as if Matthew puts Jesus’ bio at the end – in other words, these new disciples could see immediately who they were following. That this was no easy calling – it is a calling of service, of constant changes defining the needs of the people and the world, and a recognition of just who they were indeed following.

So as we answer the question of how we discern our own calling, its important that we take heed as to whose voice we are listening to. Are we easily led by a quick Tik Tok video that shows us a quick and easy way to improve our lives produced who knows whom? Or do we take the time to consider the source?

The great light that Isaiah referenced does exist. it is available at times to all of us and it appears in those moments when we recognize who we are following and we are willingly serving. But we reminded this...”For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken” It can feel like that at times. And when it does, we may be called to

rest, to take a break, to try something new, or just to pray. For me, I'm the one who sometimes refuses to remove the yoke and rest. It's upon me to recognize and to discern which door is opening. I can't do that unless I take heed, pray and consider the voices I'm listening to.

Stephanie Paulsell from Harvard Divinity School, writes, "During Epiphany, we remember the magi, who set off with their gifts on a journey into the unknown, their path illuminated by the light of a single star. Isaiah reminds us that God intends those upon whom God's light shines to be themselves a gift, "a light to the nations." Isaiah reminds us that we are called to share the light we can see and feel. We are also called, like Isaiah, to share the light that we can only yet imagine."

Amen