



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**"Discerning a call: Mine. Yours. Ours. God's"**

**Psalm 139, 1 Samuel 3:1-10**

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Where to start in a conversation about listening for the divine voice in life. Last week we began a series of sermons on the topic of discernment, listening for the divine voice in life and faith. And the place to begin was to ground ourselves deeply in God's commitment to life: "I am with you, I am for you, I want your life to flourish." And to listen and trust the wisdom of the heart- that the place to listen is not so much out there but deep in here.

All that is wonderful, but what happens when we still don't feel sure, in fact, when we are super unclear. And how do we know that the voice we believe is the wisdom of the heart, really is the wisdom of the heart and not just the wisdom of the ego, or of our desires, or of our compulsions? How do we know?

Or as Snoopy put it when asked to entitle his book of theology, "Did it ever occur to you that you might be wrong?" How's that for a title of a book of theology? A theology whose starting place is that doubt, uncertainty, fallibility is not just a possibility, not just part of the game, but the very ballpark we are in, and discernment is the name of the game. As Anne Lamott puts it: "The opposite of faith is not doubt. It is certainty. Certainty is madness. You can tell that you have created God in your own image when it turns out that he or she hates all the same people you do." Doubt is not only inevitable, it is critical, healthy. It's complete absence is dangerous. How do we discern, make decisions, move forward in a life of faith, when uncertainty is such a common human experience?

The young Samuel has been serving the elderly priest Eli in Shiloh for some time now. Eli has his little room off to the side of the sanctuary. Samuel sleeps in the sanctuary. What time is it? Well, it's night time, but it is also a time in life when people struggled to hear the voice of God- visions were not widespread. It was a familiar time- there was a rarity of clarity. In other words, it was a common human time.

And into this very human time comes the voice of God, but in that foggy state between sleep and wakefulness, night and day, Samuel is confused, and thinks it is Eli who is calling him. Was that a dream? Did you call me Eli? And the elder, also barely awake, says "It was nothing. Go back to sleep." Such a common human place to be when it comes to things spiritual- such a wonderful metaphor for the way it feels- kind of foggy. Paul said, now, we see dimly, as in a mirror. We see dimly, hear poorly. We say, "it was just a dream." Just a dream? Really? And we go back to sleep.

Again the voice comes, and Samuel is still foggy, thinking it was Eli. Who else could it be? And again Eli does not click in- the voice does not register, even with the elder. Go back to sleep. But it happens a third time. When the kid wakes you up a third time in the night with the same story, what is your immediate reaction? Really. It might be annoyance. But here Eli shows his eldership- his wisdom. Wait a minute. What was that? You heard a voice calling you? Hang on a sec. Samuel has never experienced the divine voice in life. I wonder if this isn't something more, something to pay attention to. Go back and lie down, and if it happens again, listen, invite the voice, give yourself to the voice. And he does.

This is such a rich story metaphor which speaks to so many aspects of discerning the divine in the midst of life- listening to the wisdom of the heart. First of all, it is a foggy business. We can't always know what we are hearing. Is that the voice of my ego talking? Often if we receive a vision for life that is grand, and deep we dismiss it because we think too small about our own lives. "That call can't be for me." Or sometimes it is not as clear to us as "Samuel! Samuel!" Often it is a hunch, or a nagging feeling, or a recurrent thought or dream- nothing black and white, but a whole lot of grey. Often figuring out what we are called to do in life is less like listening to a voice but weighing options and factors, and listening in the midst of ambiguity.

And this is where the pure gold of this story is found: listening and recognizing the divine voice in the fog of life is not a solo task. Neither Samuel nor Eli can discern the voice alone. Eli needs Samuel: his sight is dimming but (and I love this phrase) the lamp of God had not yet gone out in him. He's elderly and has lost some of his once formidable faculty. He needs Samuel. But Samuel has never met God. He is youthful but inexperienced. He needs the elder to recognize what to pay attention to among all the things. They need each other. We need each other, to help us get our egos out of the way and listen more deeply than the sound of our own voice, help us to hold our lives in the dignity and esteem that they actually deserve. We need each other to help us remember who we are and not get lost in the many other voices calling us to emulate other lives other than our deep and divinely blessed life that is our life. We need each other. The Spirit is best discerned in community. The wisdom of the heart is heard most clearly together.

So here are a couple of practices that you might already have but that help us listen together. Some years ago, I was faced with what was for me a monumental decision in my life- a game changer. And I wanted to be really clear because the stakes were high. And so I asked myself, "who knows me really well? Who has known me and has perspective on my life, knows me at my core, my soul?" And I made a list, and over a period of months, I went and talked to them all, and laid out the decision, and talked it through. And at the time it occurred to me that I had just consulted the board of directors for my life. Likely, whether you have consulted with them or not, you have a board of directors for your life- people who know you, who are not fooled by the immediate situation, but have the long view, and can ask the deeper questions. I believe everyone needs a board of directors for their life. Sometimes listening deeply requires consulting with the board.

Another way to listen together is to be part of a small group that meets regularly. Some meet weekly, some monthly, but meet regularly and are committed to one another in life. This is not so much the board but the group that shares the ups and downs of life. Sometimes the divine voice is heard in the little daily, weekly things in life. Sitting in a circle together regularly helps us listen to the smaller things, and enjoy/cherish the flow of life.

And thirdly, we all need a "person." Anybody watch the show, Grey's Anatomy? It's a popular show, been going for years, an evening soap in many ways. You follow the lives of a cluster of people who work in a hospital in Seattle. The main character is Meredith Grey and over the years, she and another character, Christina Yang have developed a unique relationship. They love each other deeply, and fight like cats and dogs. They are at their best together, and their worst together. They may go for quite a while not connecting, but ultimately, no matter what, they know they have each other. They are each other's person. Do you have a person? Listen to your life. You may have one and not realize it. Cultivating "a person" helps us listen to the wisdom of the heart.

And finally, so far I have been talking about listening together to the wisdom at the heart of your life. But as a Christian community, we are called to listen for the wisdom of the heart in the lives of others. That means, you may well be on the board of directors of someone else's life. Your part in a small group is significant. You may be someone else's person. We listen at the heart of each other's lives. That is what beloved community does.

Did it ever occur to you that you might be wrong? Absolutely. On a regular basis. Together we will hear the divine voice- the wisdom at the heart of it all. Amen.