

Moving On

January 31, 2016

Let Us Pray: Lord, open your word to us. Fill our hearts and this place with your spirit that we may not only hear your Word, but respond to it with love for others and work in the world. Here us as we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

If you are of a certain age, you might remember when dolls or "action figures" that could talk, were popular. Usually, getting G.I. Joe or Barbie to talk involved pulling a string that activated one of a half dozen pre-recorded random sentences (you younger generations, think Woody in *Toy Story*). However, only rarely, did these sentences have anything to do with the scenario you were pretending to act out. Your little sister may have "borrowed" G.I. Joe a time or two to have a tea party with Barbie where the conversation would go something like this:

Barbie: "Would you like to go shopping?"

Joe: "We must hold this position. Dig in!"

These days, however, the talking toys your children or grandchildren found under the tree about a month ago are a lot more sophisticated. In fact, the same speech recognition technology that enables you to have a conversation with your smart phone is now being used to turn dolls into high-tech versions of Chatty Cathy.

A 21st-century iteration of the classic Barbie doll was unveiled at last year's New York Toy Fair. Instead of a string, Hello Barbie uses a Wi-Fi connection and speech recognition technology to have what seems like real conversations with kids. A reporter from CNBC "interviewed" Barbie at the Toy Fair. Barbie performed so well that onlookers were convinced there had to be someone behind a curtain with a microphone answering the questions.

The bottom line, however, is that, as speech recognition technology gets more and more complex, it's going to get harder to tell whether you're having a "real" conversation or a computer-generated one. The 2013 movie *Her*, for example, explored the pitfalls of those blurred lines as Theodore, played by Joaquin Phoenix, falls in love with Samantha, the voice on his phone. If adults are getting more and more wrapped up in speaking with disembodied voices, we have to wonder if it's a good thing for our children. We all have to learn to listen to the right voices.

The Bible is full of stories where people heard a voice, and had to decide whether to respond. Abram was in Haran when he heard a voice saying to him, "Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's home and go to a land that I am going to show you." (*Genesis 12:1*).

Moses was tending sheep in the middle of nowhere when he heard a voice coming from a burning bush (*Exodus 3:1-15*).

Samuel was a little boy sleeping on a cot in the temple when he heard a voice calling his name (*1 Samuel 3:1-18*).

Isaiah was in the temple when he heard the Lord say, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (*Isaiah 6:8*).

And then there's this week's text, where a young man named Jeremiah hears a voice and decides to get interactive with it. The voice, of course, is the voice of God. But we have to wonder how each of these people heard it, and perhaps even more importantly, what made them answer.

A person in the 21st-century might have an increasingly tough time differentiating between a real voice and a computer-generated one, but young Jeremiah knew right away that the voice he was hearing was the Lord's. How did he know, and how do we know, when we are hearing the voice of God? Jeremiah's story offers some clues.

For starters, God's voice is best heard in the context of a community of faith (*vv. 1-3*). The superscription of the book of Jeremiah tells us that he was the son of a priest named Hilkiah from Anathoth, a town just north of Jerusalem that was one of the cities assigned to the priestly class of Levites (*Joshua 21:18*).

Growing up within a priestly community, Jeremiah would have known the stories about Abraham, Moses, Samuel and so many others who had heard God's call. He would have been schooled in prayer, and would have witnessed the people of his village pouring over sacred texts to determine God's will and way for their lives.

The voice of God thus came to Jeremiah, not out of the blue, but in the context of a community devoted to God; a community where people discerned God's voice together.

In a world where technology tends to isolate people, and where a child can have hours of conversations with a doll instead of with friends or family, we need to remember that we are wired to hear God's voice best within community.

It's in community, that we can check the inner stirrings of our hearts with others, who can help us discern the voice of God through Scripture, worship and prayer. Regular connection to Christian community is a key to making sure that the voice we're hearing is actually God's, and not simply an advertisement for our own desires.

Then, there is this: God's voice is best heard when in conversation with God (*vv. 4-8*). We don't know exactly how God's call "came" to Jeremiah (*v. 4*). Perhaps it was a dream. Perhaps it was an inner voice or maybe it was during a time of prayer. But, like Moses and Samuel before him, Jeremiah decides to test the voice by entering into conversation with it, even pushing back against it.

God told Jeremiah that he had been appointed to a prophetic mission before he was even born (*v. 5*). God knows Jeremiah, but Jeremiah also knows himself, and what being "a prophet to the nations" will entail. By pushing back in conversation, Jeremiah can sort out whether his call is something coming from within himself which could be easily dismissed, or whether this was coming from God -- a call that could not be discounted quite so fast.

Jeremiah's response to God, "Ah, Lord God" is language that usually preceded a prayer in the form of lament or complaint. The Bible reveals a lot of these kinds of conversational prayers; the Psalms are full of them.

Regular prayer is a running conversation with God. (*1 John 4:1*). God invites us, both individually and collectively, to test the spirits in prayer and in fellowship with other Christians, so that we can hear God's voice clearly.

Some of the most powerful words in the Bible are the repeated promise of God: "I am with you" (*v. 19*). We have an assurance that the God who calls us, will continue to be in conversation with us, and will continue to lead us. Those conversations are the ones that we need to record as we follow God wherever God leads. After all, God always recognizes our voice -- no strings attached. And something else - God will always supply the resources we need (*vv. 9-10*). God was the one who put the words in the mouth of Jeremiah, and God was the one who ensured that Jeremiah's mission of calling for change was a successful one.

In listening to the Acts scripture that Susan read a little bit ago, realizing that this book of the Bible is pretty much about the change-over from a church that was mainly a little sect within the Jewish nation to a Church scattered over the entire Roman Empire and largely gentile in membership we learn about the time after the first Easter when the disciples were now on their own. They had begun to preach, teach and to heal as they encountered opportunities. We are familiar enough with these stories that we forget what lies behind the stories and the radical transformation that was happening.

As Peter and John approached the temple to pray, they are confronted with a pretty common sight, a beggar, lame from his birth, seeking money. This is what happens in the first few verses of Chapter 3 in the Book of Acts. They turn to him and tell him that they have no money, but that they do have healing power from God and that they will happily share it. Peter takes the man's hand, says a prayer, and commands him to walk and he does just that.

We are used to hearing miracle healing stories from the Bible, but there are at least three things that would have struck folks of that time as most peculiar.

First, John and Peter were not official Priests of the Temple. They weren't "authorized;" at least that is what the people would have thought. They weren't the authorized speakers for God, yet God listened to them, God heard their prayers and healed the Lame Man.

Second, this healing occurred outside of the Temple. The man had been sitting at one of the Gates of the City, the one called Beautiful, but most Jews of the time believed that the Temple was the only place where God was truly present. God was not out in the hustle and bustle of the city streets. God wasn't present in everyday transactions and situations. They believed that God only dwelled in the Temple, in the inner most part the Temple, the Holy of Holies. And only those worthy to approach God, namely, the High Priests were allowed to talk to God, and that was only once per year.

A third thing that would have struck people as unusual about this story is that everyone knew that God required animal sacrifice. Now here were two fellows, Peter and John, claiming to follow someone they called the Son of God and they had abandoned the whole business of Temple sacrifice. That is what Jesus had begun when he said 'It is kindness that I want, not animal sacrifices.' And Paul stated it in *Romans (12:1)* -because of God's great mercy to us: Offer

yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing him. That is the true worship that you should offer.

All of these actions were a part of the Good News. That is Good News for us as well as for those of the early church. However, if you would continue reading into Chapter 4 of the Book of Acts, you would read how the Chief Priests and the religious authorities tried to put a stop to the disciple's activities. That would have been like trying to put wind into a bottle. The Spirit of God was at work in the world and the world was changing wherever it blew. God is present everywhere and God works in and through people to bring Good News and healing to the world. It requires a change from within our own hearts.

The story of Peter and John healing the Lame Man is a story about God getting on and moving on with life, in the world that had changed. God had done a new thing in connecting to the world through Jesus that led to new forms of worship and practices.

In the early 1500's a monk, Martin Luther, in a small German town read and re-read the scriptures. He became excited about one particular scripture in Ephesians Chapter 2:8-9 "For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it." Luther talked, preached, and challenged the religious authorities of his time. He insisted that the church and its practices had become corrupt. He called for reform so that the church would more nearly resemble the church of the New Testament. For all of his troubles he was ex-communicated from the Roman Catholic Church. And yet, after a while, the church did change many of its traditions to his suggested ways and practices.

About the same period, John Calvin, Father of the Presbyterian Church, was also calling for sweeping changes. He wanted to celebrate communion more often than just once per year. And he most importantly, wanted all people to be able to read the scriptures for themselves. He didn't want people to depend on the reading and interpretation of scripture by only the Priests. He wanted people to read scripture and to pray themselves as he believed everyone had direct access to God. This wasn't a very popular idea at the time, but it has become one of the benchmarks of our faith. In the mid 1960's, during Vatican 2, Pope John the 23rd, called for the Catholic Church to use the language of the people and he called for more open communication between Christian groups. As we listen to God, and as we experience the new life that Christ brings, we as a Church are challenged to find new ways to reach out so that people in this day and this time can hear God's Good News in a way that is meaningful for them.

I remember the first time I went to worship with Debbie, my best friend in grade school, and her family in their little Episcopalian Church. It looked so very different than my large church here at Rocky River Presbyterian. Her family had a Prayer Book, their Hymnal looked very different, it only had the melody lines, it didn't have the full musical score and they kept turning back and forth from one page to another. Everybody else but me, seemed to know where to turn, and I was completely lost. And I suspect I got to be a little bit rebellious about things when on one particular Sunday someone came down the aisle swinging a pot that was sort of smoking and there was smelly stuff all in the Church and I didn't know what that was all about. Every Sunday they had Communion and they used real wine, quite a surprise to my young taste buds. No grape juice for the Episcopalians in that church. It

was very different from what I was used to here at Rocky River. But over the times that I attended church with Debbie and her family, I found that I began to look forward to this different way of worship. Perhaps it was the Church, perhaps it was being with them, but I experienced God differently when I worshipped in that different way. But I have to admit, it took quite a while for my little girl ideas of what was “proper worship” to change and to be open to new experiences from God.

Pulitzer Prize winning Poet, Mary Oliver, in her Poem “The summer day” ends the poem with these lines. “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” I think we can ask that question as individual selves, as well as, a congregation. What are we planning to do here – how are we planning to share God’s Good news in a way that the world around us can understand? As Pastor Jon spoke about in last week’s sermon and his recent Newsletter message, in the coming weeks and months ahead, our Church Session will be discerning the future of our mission support, financially and hands-on here at this Church. Determining ways to sort out and make new mission opportunities available for all to participate in.

Change – it will be a time sort of like moving. Having moved this past year from a house that we had lived in for nearly 20 years to a condo I can tell you that you have to sort and sort and sort. You have to make decisions about everything. What to keep, what to get rid of. You have to make allowances for new space and new living conditions and it is pretty hard work. Almost a year later, we continue to work on the sorting but as each box gets emptied and sorted there is a sense of accomplishment and that will be how it will be for us as we work through what is in store and what lies ahead for us.

In Acts, Luke told us that Jesus opened the scriptures to the first disciples and set them free to tell his story to the rest of the world. As Peter and John went about God’s business they initiated new ways to worship and gave people permission to see God out in the world working in their lives. Today, God is still at work. We may encounter God in our various communities as well as in our Sanctuary. We may find that God is inviting us to new ways of service, as well as, continuing through present forms and activity. What is very clear is that God is not standing still and either should we.

God is moving on through our lives and in the world. God invites us into partnership to tell others the Good News in words and in action. Today and in the week ahead let Mary Oliver’s question become a question for your life now. “Tell me, then, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” What is it that you plan to do with God’s help in your life? What is it that we together as God’s church community in this place plan to do with the life God has given us here –

Let me close with a little story that someone a while back forwarded me from the internet.

A young girl had begged and pleaded for a beautiful plastic beaded necklace she had seen at the 5 Below store. She received that necklace as a gift at her next birthday. She was delighted with the necklace and wore it everywhere. One evening, her father came in at bedtime, and gently asked her if she would give up her necklace. She looked at him bewildered and cried out NO! In a few months, the father came again and asked gently if she would give up her necklace. Her eyes filled with tears and her lower lip trembled and her hands clutched the necklace around her neck. The father kissed her goodnight and left the room. Almost another year went by and it was coming up to the girl’s birthday again. The night before the birthday, the father again came in quietly just before bedtime and asked if she was ready to give up her pretty plastic necklace. She looked at him for a long time

and then told him that if he thought she should, she would do that. She slipped the necklace over her head and handed it to him. At the same time the father took a velvet covered box out of his pocket and handed it to her. When she opened the box, there lay a necklace of real pearls, far more beautiful and lustrous than the one she had given up. She looked at her father with a question in her eyes. Her father told her that he had had the pearls all along, and that he had waited until she was ready to move on to this new thing. He did not want to force her to make the change but he wanted to offer her the opportunity for something new, when she was ready to let go of the old.

The Spirit of God is at work in our own lives and in our Church and in the world. God is working in us and through us in times of change. God has good gifts in store for us, if we are willing to accept his guidance and the opportunities he offers. Let us give thanks to God for these new opportunities for his never failing love. Then let us move out and move on with God, trusting that God has good in store for us.

Let us Pray: God you know that change is not easy for us but your spirit is blowing where it wills. Keep us open to your guidance and direction. Keep us connected to you through Jesus' love for us. Amen.