

Message: “Do You Love Me?”

How do you respond when you hear the voice of God? That’s the question posed for us through the lives of Peter and Paul (John 21:1-19; Acts 9:1-6). Our scripture readings are dramatic. So much so, they seem to set a standard few of us can meet.

Yet, we believe the voice of God comes to each of us and to all of us. Sometimes we hear the voice through the voices of others. The call can be communal. Yes, this means we can hear God’s voice in worship. We must be listening, though. This means being awake and attentive, especially during prayer.

In one sense, this is what the stewardship of prayer is. We aren’t always comfortable with silence and want to fill it with something – music, movement or something. But perhaps it’s time for us to “*be still and know that I am God*” (Psalm 46:10). Let’s make this our watch word for worship.

I think it’s appropriate to focus on our commitment to Christ again. Let’s agree to hold this space together for the purpose of making and remaking our commitment to be disciples, followers of Jesus the Christ. Saul needed to be introduced to the one who was calling. We might need to be reintroduced to the one who calls us.

What does it mean to say we’re followers of Christ? Let’s explore this together. Our songs praise the Christ who calls us. Our prayers invite Jesus to come and lead us, walk with us, guide our feet while we run this race called life.

Christ is still calling. We aren’t done with the journey. Let’s renew our call, revive the passion we once had to serve in Jesus’ name. Perhaps we can find some way of saying “Yes, Lord” once again. We might find our mission and lives reinvigorated by this moment as we worship the One who first loved us.

Last week, we stood with Peter and the apostles as they faced their accusers in court. They showed us a life of faith can be lived with boldness and confidence, assured of our place in God’s kin-dom and this life. There was no room for doubt, only belief.

This week, we stand at two critical points in the life of the church.

The first is on the seashore with Peter, Jesus and six other disciples. Jesus and Peter take a stroll with John following along, listening in. That’s when Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?”

To be clear, Jesus knows what lies in Peter’s heart. God knows what lies in everyone’s heart (Hebrews 12:4). Jesus is asking to make sure Peter knows! Peter’s purpose in life has changed. He isn’t going back to fishing, other than as a pastime.

Jesus is calling Peter to his true vocation. It’s time for him to fish for people. Making disciples who make disciples. That’s what we call it today. We follow Jesus’ mission, handed down from one disciple to the next, generation after generation until it comes to us. The mark of a true disciple is passing on what we learned to those who follow us. When we pass on the way of making disciples, we’re truly followers of Christ.

The voice we hear calls us to the way of Jesus. We’re given an invitation to join this movement, changing the world, even as it changes us. How we respond is what matters.

“Who are you?” That’s the question Saul asked. The light and voice knocked him down. Saul is faced with someone more powerful, more present than he has ever been, even in his search for meaning, purpose and purity of faith. Saul isn’t on board yet, but he’s smart enough to ask a question and then wait and listen.

When we continue reading, we find Saul is now blind. The one who was so driven, who was so sure, who made distinctions, who sized up the others at a glance, now has to be guided. This one who has realized they’re blind has to listen to a voice other than their own. We, too, can be spiritually blind. So we need to listen to other voices.

Dr. Darryl Stephens says being a witness doesn’t always mean speaking. The moral witness of the church begins with listening. He said, “To bear witness is to unburden our neighbors from the agony of an untold story. We’re called to be present and attentive, to hear one another’s stories. And then, to care for that story as if it were our own.”¹

¹ Darryl Stephens, *Bearing Witness in the Kingdom*, UMW, 2021, p35

What voices do we need to listen to, to hear the voice of Christ?

Some voices have been silenced in our certainty. Some stories have been ignored in an age of shouting and anger. Yet, we claim to know the Lord we seek to follow, the one whose name we take and whose path we follow.

“Who are you?” is a question we need to ask as fervently as did the blind, frightened Saul lying on the side of the road to Damascus. He needed to listen to others who would help him know the new story he was writing with his life. Saul was to be a witness to the one who called him, but he needed to learn how to find that One by listening to others.

We’re the same today. We need to listen to the stories of Peter and Paul. We need to listen to the stories of the other disciples, men and women of faith. We need to listen to the stories of those who have gone before us. We need to listen to the stories of our peers. We need to listen to the stories of our neighbors. We need to listen to the stories of those who come after us. For God’s voice is heard in their lives.

How do we listen for the voice of God? By telling stories of how God has called us; how we heard God’s voice. So, with your permission, I’ll share a bit of my story. As a caveat, I don’t share it to glorify me or to raise up any of my behaviors. I share it to give glory to God’s grace.

I’d like to tell you how I experienced God’s presence. Let me offer a little background.

I was raised in the church but fell away after graduating from college. I struggled to understand how to resolve questions I had about the Bible and God. The more I turned away, the harsher I was. I went out of my way to publicly humiliate those who were Christians.

Fast-forward twenty years to January 2000. This was a period of great trauma and stress in my life. My sister had a tumor on her spine. My Dad’s health was poor. My business was failing, I lost my family’s money. My girlfriend of several years had broken up with me after she had an affair. I was struggling with alcohol.

At 4:30 am on a Saturday morning, I found myself shouting at God,
“If you exist, show me!!”

That’s when I felt it. I felt God’s voice. I didn’t really hear a voice, but I felt it with every fiber of my being. **God said, “Be still.”**

My response? I fell asleep.

I woke up thirty minutes later, feeling fully sober, full refreshed – like I’d been sleeping for a week!

I’d met a pastor a month earlier. Pastor Scott gave me his number. I knew he got up early in the morning, so I called him and said, **“Can I come and see you?”**

To his credit, he didn’t hang up on me at 5:00 am. Pastor Scott said, “We have a group going to a Christian conference today. There’s a seat on the bus if you want to go” I went and floated through the music, the sharing and the stories like I was on cloud nine. God is good!

I wish I could tell you life was easy and the path was smooth afterward. It wouldn’t be true. I had a lot of bad habits to unlearn and I’m still learning good habits. But God has been with me, every step of the way. No matter how hard things get, I know God is there.

I can still feel God’s voice. Psalm 46:10 is my life verse. This is what has led me on the journey of a lifetime, brought so many wonderful people into my life, and gave me the opportunity to share with you, to walk the way with you for a time.

No matter what you’ve been, no matter what you’ve done, no matter what others have done to you, God is with you. Even better, if God could redeem Saul of Tarsus, a man dedicated to destroying those who followed Jesus, turning him into a great apostle, then there is hope for our lost loved ones.

People, we must return to the streets to reclaim both the helpless and the hopeless, the homeless and the destitute, gang members and prostitutes. We can’t afford to stop until everyone in our community recognizes just how loving and powerful God is! To God be the glory.

Can I get an Amen?

Let us pray ...

Lord, thank you for calling us. Thank you for our soul, the deep, mysterious part of us always reaching out, seeking a connection with you. Help us to hear when you ask, “Do you love me?” Help us to embrace and accept your love and grace. Teach us to listen deeply. Show us we can trust you. Unite our will, mind and body in our love for you, for each other and for those we do not yet know. We pray this in Jesus’ name, amen.

Acts 9:1-6 (CEB)

Meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest, seeking letters to the synagogues in Damascus. If he found persons who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, these letters would authorize him to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. During the journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, “Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?”

Saul asked, “Who are you, Lord?”

“I am Jesus, whom you are harassing,” came the reply. “Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do.”