

Sermon for 5/5/19
Easter 3C

Have you ever followed a hunch only to find out that it was a really good idea? It happened to me once nearly 40 years ago when I was a student at General Theological Seminary in New York City. On Friday nights, from 7 to past midnight, I was one of the guitar-playing assistants for the Nightwatch program at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The seminary is on 20th Street and the Cathedral 110th, an easy commute on the Broadway local subway. That was in the days when New York City was a far more dangerous place than it is today. People who were used to the city lived by the idea that if you didn't feel comfortable going to some particular place then the smart thing was just not to go there at all.

One early Saturday morning, after Nightwatch ended a little later than usual, I went down to the subway to catch a train home. I was tired and after coming through the turnstiles, I really wanted to turn right, walk a little way down the platform and sit on one of the benches there. For some reason, taking that turn just didn't feel like the right thing to do that night. So, instead of sitting, I stood directly in front of the turnstiles where the token seller in the booth would be able to see me. There were several other people standing there, too, but a couple of people took the right turn and headed toward the benches, out of sight of the token seller.

Suddenly, one man came racing towards us from down the tracks, jumped over the turnstile and told the ticket seller, "They said they had a knife and they've got my wallet! Call the police." Then he ran up the stairs and out onto the street. A couple of guys – obviously the robbers – sauntered up to those of us who were standing there and said, "What's he talking about? Nothing happened!" Since we heard that they were armed, none of us did anything to stop them as they left the station. I suppose I could have performed some sort of guitar case martial arts maneuver to stop them, but, quite honestly, I was just grateful that no one was hurt.

What has always stood out to me about that event was the subtle, inner feeling that prevented me from sitting down. I've always felt that God was watching over me at that moment and that's where my inner feeling came from. I'm grateful that I actually listened.

We don't always listen, do we?
Or am I the only one who can be too bull-headed to give in to some of my inner feelings?
Aren't there times when all of us think that we know best, times when we just carry on doing what we were doing without paying any attention to the subtle warning signals?
And that's a shame because our not listening means that we can miss out on some worthwhile things in our lives.

Look at today's Gospel.
Peter and a number of other disciples were in Galilee, a couple of weeks after Jesus' resurrection on Easter Day, when they decided to go fishing.
Now this wasn't a relaxed evening of sitting with a rod and reel while hoping for a nibble.
This was hard work, active, commercial fishing with nets and equipment.
Even with all that effort, they hadn't caught anything all night long.

Just after daybreak, a stranger on the shore suggested that they lower their nets over the right side of the boat and try again.
When it came time to pull the nets in, they couldn't because they were so full of fish.
It was at that moment that one of the disciples said, "It is the Lord!"

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And, of course, it was.

Peter and the others came ashore, took 153 large fish out of their nets and had breakfast with Jesus.

Then, in an important moment in Church history, Jesus then forgave Peter for betraying him three times before the crucifixion, giving Peter the status of being the leader – the Primate – of the early church.

And all because they followed a simple suggestion to put their nets over the right side of the boat.

Here's my point: God is at work in our lives.

The more that we try to be open to God, the better the possibility that we might actually hear a simple suggestion like, "Don't sit down in the subway station tonight" or "throw your net over the right side of the boat."

Our openness to God, through prayer, through quiet time, through thinking things over, through trying to pay attention, helps us to hear God's voice in all the mysterious ways that God's voice might speak to us.

There's a natural question: How do we know the difference between God's voice and our own random thoughts?

Quite honestly, mostly through what happens after we choose to follow the suggestion, through the results.

There were other times when I was cautious in the subway, but only that time stands out in my memory.

But that one time taught me that God can speak to me in some very subtle ways.

And I've found that the closer I am to God in my life, the more likely it is that I'll begin to understand what God is telling me to do.

And let me give you a word to the wise: Paying attention to God is a whole lot easier than ignoring God. We certainly heard that in today's reading from Acts.

Saul was traveling the road to Damascus in order to arrest the Christians he found there.

Suddenly, there was a blinding light and a loud voice; Saul fell to the ground and knew that he was in the presence of God.

He became a faithful Christian, his name became Paul, and he was the greatest evangelist that the world has ever seen.

While a blinding light and a loud voice from above might remove any doubts as to what God is trying to tell us, in the long run I think it's easier – and less terrifying – just to be as open to God in our lives as we can be. Remember, just as Jesus Christ was able to guide the disciples into catching more fish, Jesus Christ is able to guide us as well.

Jesus speaks to us through our feelings, through our thoughts, through the words of other people, and sometime through coincidences that have a deeper meaning for us.

Somehow, someway, sometime, Jesus is speaking or will speak to you.
What are you doing to listen?

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