

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Scott Kenefake, Interim Pastor
"God's Call to Love Unbound"
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20
3rd Sunday after Epiphany
January 21, 2018

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed (God's) mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." ¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

We are currently in the season of Epiphany (manifestation, or appearance), and looking at the Gospel readings for this season, I was struck by the fact that Epiphany both begins and ends with stories in which we *hear the voice of God*.

For example, on the first Sunday in Epiphany we heard the story of the baptism of Jesus, with its climax in the voice of God speaking to Jesus: "*You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*" (Mark 1:11).

And then, in a few weeks—on the last Sunday in Epiphany—immediately before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of our Lenten journey--we'll hear the *Transfiguration story*, in which Jesus and the inner core of his disciples ascend to a high mountain. But this time it is the *disciples* who hear the voice of God. The voice of God says, "*This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him*" (9:7).

The disciples, in a way, represent *us* in that passage. "*Listen to him.*" *Listen to Jesus.*

This phenomenon of the divine voice actually has a name in the Jewish tradition. The Hebrew phrase that names this divine voice is *bat kol*. Translated into English, *bat kol* literally means "*the daughter of a sound.*" So, the voice of God, the divine voice, is the daughter of a sound.

We hear this same voice in the Hebrew Bible in 1st Kings 19, the story of Elijah in a cave when the presence of God passes by him. Elijah hears a "*still, small voice*" (19:12, KJV)—that's the *bat kol*, the daughter of a sound.

The Hebrew for the voice that Elijah hears translates literally into English as a “*sound of thinnest silence, a still, small voice*” are all different ways of attempting to express what perhaps lies beyond the boundaries of speech.¹

And I’m wondering this morning if *you* have heard this voice?

An Episcopal Priest was leading a Sunday morning group ... in which she explained to the group this notion of the *bat kol*. After explaining it, she asked the group, “*Have you ever heard this voice?*”

Several in the group had.

For instance, one woman spoke about a time when she was seven years old, and she heard a voice speak to her as clearly as any voice had ever spoken to her: “*You belong to me.*” Then she said, “*I didn’t hear it with my ears. But I heard it.*”

Another woman reported an evening when she had an extraordinarily strong sense of the presence of Jesus in the room, and she said to Jesus, “*Where have you been?*” She heard a voice say back to her, “*I never left you.*” She also said, “*I didn’t hear it with my ears. But I heard the voice.*”²

We also sometimes hear the voice of God in a less dramatic way—in *the events of our lives*. The contemporary Christian writer *Frederick Buechner* has a wonderful way of putting this:

*Listen to your life. Listen to what happens to you, because it is through what happens to you that God speaks. It’s in language that’s not always easy to decipher, but it’s there, powerfully, memorably, unforgettably.*³

And so God speaks to us in the events of our lives.

But we need a word of caution here--don’t think that means *everything* that happens to us is somehow God trying to get our attention—it’s more *sacramental* than that.

Rather, *in, with, and through* the events of our lives, we are being addressed by God.

God sometimes speaks to us through *scripture*, through that meditative devotional use of scripture that many of you are familiar with, perhaps, in a daily practice.

God also speaks to us through the *liturgical seasons of the church year*. Indeed, that’s one of their central purposes.

So we are back to the season of Epiphany—and back to that *bat kol*—and back to the call of the disciples.

You see, during Jesus’ lifetime, the core of the movement was centered around a person; wherever Jesus was, there the movement was. Thus it was not only a movement, but also literally a group on the move. Of the crowds who were attracted to Jesus, not everybody who responded to him followed him literally in the sense of joining the itinerant movement—like Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Most probably remained in their own communities as “local sympathizers.” Before his death, we do not know how many sympathizers there were, but they must have numbered at least several hundreds and perhaps a few thousands.

But some did join him “*on the road.*” Though it was not unheard of in first-century Palestine for a group of people to leave their homes and follow a charismatic leader, it was *striking*. The group’s *composition* was also exceptional; in addition to the nucleus of Jesus and the twelve, it included outcasts and women, thus violating the central norms of the culture. Though some Pharisees and well-to-do people were attracted to it, it seems to have been largely a

¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Days of Awe and Wonder*, Harper Collins, New York, 2017, pp. 227, 228

² Ibid. pp. 228, 229

³ Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner*, Harper, San Francisco, 1992

movement of common people, including many who were poor. For the core who travelled with him, there may have been special requirements which did not apply to those who remained in local communities. As an itinerant movement, it sometimes was offered local hospitality by sympathizers, but also no doubt often slept in the open air. As a group on the move, traveling through Galilee and finally to Jerusalem, it must have been a remarkable sight.⁴

But, ask yourself: *“What was Jesus calling these people to do? (and by implication, what is Jesus calling us to do?)”*

The answer, I think, is found in the very heart of Jesus’ message; whereas first century Judaism spoke primarily of the holiness of God, *Jesus spoke primarily of the compassion of God.*

You see, it’s not that first century Judaism didn’t speak of the compassion of God—it did—and Jesus never denied that God was holy. Rather, the issue was which of these was to be the *central paradigm for imaging God* and for portraying the life of the faithful community.

Jesus repeatedly emphasized the compassion of God—and he was calling his followers to “imitate” (*imitatio dei*) the compassion of God.

For example:

- The father of the prodigal son *“had compassion”*
- The Samaritan was the one who *“showed compassion”*
- The unmerciful servant did *not* act in accord with the *compassion* which had been shown him
- The tax collector—in the Parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee—appealed to the *compassion* of God

Aspects of Jesus’ healing activity also point to the same quality: consistently the motivation was *compassion*.⁵

And living lives of compassion means living *“as if”* other people matter and *as if* we ourselves are beloved of God. It means that even if we struggle to believe that we ourselves are loved—or that others are deserving of more (fill in the blank):

Peace, justice, food, security, appreciation, a home, health care, freedom, good government, joy, blessing, community, education, meaningful work, etc.

We would be unable to envision a world in which doing so would merely be a matter of choice. Care for our neighbors would be simply a matter of course.

Jesus is holding out a compassionate vision (which he calls the kingdom of God) to help us imagine such a world and to shape our lives on the possibilities.

You see, living *as if* makes certain assumptions, chief of which is that God’s desire for all of humanity-- and in fact all of creation—is *wholeness* and *health* in all manner of things. In an *as if* world, we would not question whether we ought to create a society in which all children can thrive, whatever their family background or neighborhood.

Pundits and politicians would no longer sway us with the consequences of leaving anyone outside of the benefits that the powerful accrue. Rather, the orientation of all decision makers, all citizens—fueled by people of faith who hear God’s call to life *as if*⁶—would be one of making choices that have at their heart *compassion*.

⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, Harper San Francisco, 1987, pp. 128, 130

⁵ Ibid. p. 128

⁶ Melinda A. Quivik, *Preaching God’s Transformative Justice*, Third Sunday of Epiphany, Year B, Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, 2011, pp. 80, 81

Friends, Jesus forms a movement of people who trust him and believe his message. They believe that they don't have to wait for this or that to happen, but rather that they can begin living in a new and better way *now*, a way of life Jesus conveys by the pregnant phrase *kingdom of God*.

Life for them now is about an interactive relationship—reconciled to God, reconciled to one another—and so they see their entire lives as an opportunity to make the beautiful music of God's kingdom so that more and more people will be drawn into it, and so that the world will be changed by their growing influence.

Everyone can have a role in this expanding kingdom—women and men, powerful and powerless, old and young, urban and rural, white collar and blue collar, religious and irreligious. Each life can add beauty to the compassionate message of Jesus. Each person can be an agent of the compassionate kingdom.⁷

That is what it means to be "*fishers*" of people. Amen.

⁷ Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, W Publishing Group, Nashville, 2006, p. 83