

God is Always Calling
Lessons: John 14:23-29, ACTS 16:9-15

I'll be honest. I've never heard an audible voice from out of cloud of smoke. I've never had a dream where some angel of God gave me a clear message about what I ought to do. I'll admit I've wished for it from time to time. It would be so much easier.

It would be so much easier than the different kind of listening that faith requires. Of course, I would say "yes" without hesitation to! Some angel glowing in the dark would appear and say, "David, there is a church without a pastor that needs your help. They have no money to pay you, but they have a manse with a leaking roof. And if you will come, they have Season Skiing Passes at Vail for you and your family." I would start singing, "Here I am, Lord...I have heard you calling in the night."

On the other hand, if Jesus himself came into my room in the night and said, "Come over to Levelland and help us," I would tell everyone about the bad dreams you can have after too much Mexican food for supper.

How do we know God is calling? Even if we have some kind of dream, we have to ask a few questions, don't we? We can't erase the faith and good sense interpretations of the "still, small voice" we hear. And in spite of the clarity of the call that Paul heard in the middle of the night, we have lots of stories about how God talked to people who were ...well, just plain disconnected from reality.

How do we know God is calling? And how do we know it is God calling – except of course that God would always be telling us to do something we wanted to do all along? We know God does not always agree with us, even if we wish it so.

Our scripture lesson gives us some help today. If we were listening, we heard about two people who heard callings – Paul and Lydia. What they have in common may help us listen more closely, and sift what we hear better. What they have in common is simple: they were always listening, because they both believed God was always calling.

We miss lots of messages because we are expecting angels in dreams or booming voices. So we pray and ask God to speak to us like the drama passages in the Bible that they picture in the movies. But what if we change our prayers? What if we stop asking God to speak, and start asking God to help us listen more closely to the callings that are all around us? If we change our idea of what God's call and calling are, we may hear a lot more messages and be a lot less frustrated. Listening may be easier than we think.

Let me explain in a roundabout way. We Presbyterians talk about "call" a lot, especially when there is a Pastor Nominating Committee on the loose and searching for a new leader. We pray that they will discern the spiritual gifts and skills in God's call to a new pastor. We pray that they will find the person who God has already called to be a pastor. We pray that God's call will be a "match" for who we want – or even more important and sometimes different – who we need.

But sooner or later, most PNC's I have worked with are praying differently. They grow in faith and realize that there is no magic messiah out there in the future that God has already predetermined. They come to understand that their job is not to wait for the angel in the dream or the booming voice that gives them certainty in a choice. They begin to see more clearly the skills that most every pastor needs, and they come to some joint understanding of what our pastor needs. They sift through a the pile of names and biographies, and none of them start glowing in the dark so they can just pull God's person out of the pile. They learn to pray by listening to everything they hear, and pray that together they will hear enough to have confidence that they are calling the person who is also listening the same way.

When PNC's work this way, they are like both Paul and Lydia, and they are genuinely Presbyterian. Remember? God is always calling, always speaking. Our task is to listen until we learn to listen better, to listen until we can hear the persistent callings from God and sift them from the background noise and the loud foreground blare that makes listening harder.

There is one thing that we must understand before the other lessons come: We are not listening, hoping-against-hope for a long-silent God to speak. We are listening to the Lord and Savior who is always speaking so that we will become better at hearing God's calling in the middle of the noise of the busy day and the sounds of the scary nights.

Once we understand that God is always calling, then some other lessons fall right into place:

1. Prayer is more about listening than speaking. If we are always talking in our prayers, then we are probably making noises that make hearing God's calling harder. Silence in church is sometimes scary for us. We want sound. Maybe we want noise because we are a bit nervous about what we might hear if we were really listening.

2. When we are listening for God's calling, we will hear messages that will become clear because they stay. God is remarkably persistent – even relentless. So the thought that keeps recurring, the idea that won't go away, the thing you think you should do that stays there when you try to ignore it – start asking God if those things are ways God is trying to get to you to help you, to mold you, to change you, maybe even save you. And sometimes those persistent impressions start you off on a new adventure to a strange place like Macedonia. And sometimes they tell you that doing what you have been doing where you are is exactly what God wants you to do.

3. When we are listening, most of the time God will be calling us to do the obvious. God's calling is always more about the *what* and *when* and *how* questions than the *where* and *why* questions. The reason we remember the Macedonian call is we are generally asking God where we should be or why God is doing something to someone. If we trust a little more and listen a little more, we will hear the calling about what to do, or how to solve a problem or the when timings of now or later.

4. And most importantly, God will never be calling us to do something that we cannot imagine Jesus doing. If we are worried about what we want to do more than ought to do, we will do lots of talking and we never hear clear callings. Maybe we need to ask ourselves if we are wanting God's blessing and permission to do what we already want to do. And maybe what we want to do is something we can't imagine Jesus doing, so it is something God would not want us

to be doing – which is why we talk more than listen in the first place. We say every Sunday in our worship, “your will be done on earth.” But is it our prayer? After we pray it, how much time do we spend listening to what Christ’s will for us is in our living?

The way we hear more easily what God is always calling us to do is to become more familiar with the kinds of things Jesus did and told his followers to do. Then what God is calling us to do becomes more obvious, and God does not have to be so persistent because we get the messages more easily. And we spend a lot more time in prayer listening, because we asking what Christ wants us to do instead of telling God what God should do that we want. God is always calling, God will not stop calling, God is generally calling us do the obvious things that Jesus did, the way Jesus did them and wants us to do them.

There is one other Presbyterian truth about God’s calling that we need to make clear this morning. God is calling everyone, each one. God calls each and all of us. God is always speaking, and God is always calling you.

We talk about Presbyterians and Reformed Traditions and the way we are Protestants and Reformation people. The truth is a lot of different parts of the church gave us the great themes of Reformation history. Luther and the Lutherans gave birth to “by grace alone.” The English reformers – Anglicans and Scots and Puritans – gave us “by scripture alone.” The earliest protesters against the priests – the Prussians under Jan Huss and the Anabaptists who became the Mennonites and Brethren and Baptists – “gave us the priesthood of all believers.” All those people came before Calvin. We often think that Calvin’s gifts to the Reformation were our Presbyterian themes of “the sovereignty of God” and the “doctrine of election,” but those ideas go all the way back to St. Augustine.

The great and unique gift of Calvin and our Presbyterian and Reformed ancestors was the doctrine of “calling.” Calvin was the first to formulate the truth that all of us are called, and each one of us has a calling.

So, some people are called by God to be pastors of a congregation and shepherds to a flock. But what really makes us pastors a little different is we are called to the church to help you with your calling in the world. Preachers and priests are not the only ones “called by God.”

Everyone is called to see some job as a calling – a “vocation.” God’s voice is always speaking in the world by what we do in the world. We are all called to speak Christ’s message by the what and when and how of the work we do in a vocation.

Some of us are teachers in classrooms, and we are witnesses to our calling because we ask how we can serve God through math or English by the way we treat the students in our care. God is always speaking to us about the ways we can teach, and we remember that God is always speaking to our students, too. When we see calling the way Calvin sees calling, it is pretty absurd to think that could kick God out of the schools. God never left. I thank God for teachers like you who see praying for your students as the more important way that we keep prayer in the schools.

Some of us are business people, and we know that we need to listen to stay faithful when lots of loud messages come to us and compete with what Jesus would obviously do. When we see our business as a calling with God, we turn down some deals and we avoid some company. When we

see God at work in the middle of our work, we listen for chances to do some things for God who is our best partner.

Some of us are attorneys who see the dark side or the troubled side or the conflict side of messy life. And listening to that voice that never always speaking, we ask how we can help God do what needs to be done. We know what Jesus is always trying to do: to do justice, and love kindness; to walk humbly and live mercy. In Presbyterian life, we celebrate people who are called to be attorneys; Calvin was a lawyer. I thank God there are a bunch of really great Christians called to be attorneys, and a bunch of them are Presbyterians.

Most all of us are glad to have jobs where use the gifts and graces of God's calling. But some of us have jobs that are not callings. We work at one thing so that we can do another thing that is the place we hear God speaking and we can do Christ's work. We have a good example. Remember Lydia? She sold purple cloth so that she could be faithful to the Lord. She listened for the voice she heard, and she found her calling giving hospitality to strangers. Paul heard a call in a dream and he recognized the voice, because he had been listening every day and night for a long time. What they had in common was they knew that God is always speaking, already calling.

We Presbyterians know that, too. So we keep listening, and we stay faithful. So just listen. Just ask God what you are called to do, and how Christ would do what you are doing, and when in God's time is your now or later. Then just listen. God is always speaking. God will keep calling until the message gets through.