

When Caller ID says "God"
Matthew 9:9-13, Genesis 12:1-9

Technology is an amazing thing. The cell phone is more than 20 years old. Remember the first one you saw? My daughter was in the 5th grade when she wanted to be a cell phone for Halloween. So we put taped three boxes together, put in a plastic pipe for the antenna, and she climbed inside. The real phones were almost as big and just as novel. Now, they are just part of our lives. We even automatically turn them on to silent when we come into church.

There are a few things about cell phones that I like and don't like, like that they are with you all the time and they work and don't work. But there are two things I really like about them. First is that all the calls are local. It took me forever to realize that when I called a friend in Colorado I was not paying more for long distance. The second thing I love is Caller ID. When Renée calls me several times a day from San Antonio, I know it is a very important, and so I step out of that committee meeting.

What if the phone rang one day, and Caller ID said "God"? How many of us would be really excited, and how many of us would say, "Oh no, what have I done now?"

How many times have you wanted to talk to God about something and wished it were that easy? Just put God in the memory dial, maybe on "5" so God would be right at the center of your phone life? ...No need to memorize the number. Talking to God would be a local call anytime - just one button away.

Today, the lessons assigned to us are both about calling. God shows up to talk to Abram and tells him to pack up all his things and wives and children, and move to a new and strange country. And God makes a promise to Abram, and Abram trusts God's message enough to start packing, God will be with him in every step of the journey, and God will bless him and all the people who come after him who listen to the voice will be blessed.

Jesus is walking along, and sees a man sitting in a tax-collecting booth, and he calls out to him, "Follow me." And Matthew hears the call and leaves his work for a new life. Like Abram, Matthew hears God in the call of Jesus. For Matthew it was easier.

We talk about God's "calling" all the time in church. God calls us God's own, God calls us to mission, God calls each of us by name, God calls us to the ministry. But God's calling seems completely different from all the other calling. First, it always seems like a long-distance call, and second, ...how do we know it is God talking?

How did Abram know it was God? We always wish we heard a voice out loud so we would not have to depend on faith and not being sure so much. Abram is the great example of faith. How did he know it was God?

Well, let's take a couple of lessons from Abram.

God is always calling, and God is calling everyone.

We think God is long-distance. We think God only does spiritual "speaking" on rare occasions, like big messages about packing tents or great mountain top experiences. We

sometimes think that God is not speaking because we are not close enough to God. If we were closer to God, we could hear. So, our not hearing is because God is long-distance, and God being far away is our fault.

Let's correct that thought right away. God is always local. God is always with us. The words of the centuries old prayer are some of my favorite: "God is closer to us than breathing, nearer than hands and feet."

My guess is that Abram did not have a cell phone. My guess is that this message he got is one he did not get the first time. There was no voice mail recording that he could hear over and over again. There was no email, no short text message he could save. But we know enough about Abram that he was attentive to God. With all the other things Abram had on his mind, he just kept God in his heart and mind - and listened with his spirit.

So maybe we just need to expect God to be speaking, and speaking all the time. Then what we can work on is hearing that "still, small voice" that sometimes gets drowned out by the noise of our lives, by the interference that blocks the signal.

How do we hear the calling? How do we know it is God making the call? It may be simpler than we think. Just expect God to be calling. God is always speaking, so find a way that you can turn your attention away from other things to listen. Open up a space for listening, and see what happens.

Isn't that the real reason this is such a special sanctuary. Here we have a space for listening. Here in some spirit way, God speaks. Here we turn our attention away, and turn our attentiveness to. Here we get the chance to hear what God is always saying, and what God is saying to all of us and each of us. Here we learn to listen, so we can be better listeners everywhere and all the time.

Let me ask you to do an experiment this week. Pretend that you have God on Caller ID. What happens when you are expecting a call from someone who is important to you? What happens when that call comes? You turn your attention away from what you are doing. You focus on listening to what they are saying. You know that if you don't get it the first time, your friend will explain or repeat or keep talking until you understand. Listen for those impressions that don't go away, for those thoughts that keep coming back, for those things that you sense are some kind of "message" that gets your attention. Instead of waiting for the big, deep voice that jolts you and asks you to do something terrifying, listen for the smaller message that says you might try moving in a new direction that could be God's direction.

I mention my father from time to time, and he is always more on my mind in June. I remember overhearing him say something to my mother. They were talking about being in church on Sunday nights, and about a wonderful man that the pastor would ask to pray sometimes in the services. My dad said, "I love Max, but something always bothers me about his prayers. He is always begging God to speak to us so we will know what God wants us to do. I think he has it backward. Most of the time, I think God is just telling us to use the good sense we have and do the obvious." Most of the time, it's listening to the thoughts we can't get out of our heads that move us in God's direction.

So, Abram had moved from Ur to Heron. He settled there, but he was not really settled. He had land and family and lots of possessions, but he knew that there was more to life, more to living, more to meaning, more to purpose - still something else out there. Even at 75 years old, he had not arrived yet. There was something bigger, deeper, better. The impression became a message, and the conviction became a call. So when it became obvious, Abram packed up and knew that God was leading him to new territory, and God would keep calling him until he arrived in the place where God wanted him, and God would bless him all along the way, because... the call is always local, and God keeps calling until we know the call is from God.

—*God is always calling, and God is calling everyone.*

Now let me just add one more little word to help you this week as you try to turn your attention and be attentive to that quiet, spiritual speaking.

God is always calling, and God "speaks" sometimes through a speaker.

Matthew was not Abram. He had not been listening much at all in his busy life as a tax collector. But he was like Abram. He had listened to that recurring voice in his head that kept telling him life was not what it could be, and Matthew could not get rid of the message.

So when Jesus walked up and said, "Follow me" Matthew heard in someone's words an answer to the question that he had heard in his own mind and spirit for a long time.

Sometimes it happens that way, doesn't it? If we keep paying attention to the question, we hear something from someone somewhere that we just know is an answer - the answer. And we say to ourselves or to a friend, "I think God is telling me something, I think God is speaking to me." God sent this person. God was in the middle of our conversation. We are just talking with friends, having casual conversation. And somehow, the direction shifts and the talk goes deeper and more real. That is when we really need to start listening. ...listening for the other voice that is always speaking. Scripture tells us over and over again that God sends messengers, that God speaks through speakers. Since God is always calling, the messengers are all around us.

So this week, turn your attention away from the noise enough to be attentive to the voice that comes when we are ~~listening~~ listening. And pay attention when the conversation goes deeper with a friend. Keep listening. Since God is always calling, always speaking, the more you work at listening, the easier it will be to ~~recognise~~ recognize God's message in the messenger.

This week, use that cell phone as a reminder to be attentive. Every time it rings, think to yourself, this could be a messenger. This could be a message from God, because...

God is always calling; God is calling everyone; and God "speaks" sometimes through a speaker.

You could be talking to someone this week, and look down at the screen on your cell phone and be really surprised at who the Caller ID says is calling.