

Sermon Text for September 27, 2015

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Acts 2:1-5, Genesis 18:16-22

“Overhearing God”

I know that few of you went to the Eagles game last week and you have told me how you heard God’s name mentioned quite a few times in that awful drubbing. That is not what we are going to be talking about today, in this sermon titled Overhearing God, it is going to be more along the lines of what has been happening for me over these past 5 Sundays.

Over this past month I have so enjoyed teaching the Middle School Sunday School class. It is one of my favorite ages to teach because it is there that children become young men and women and start to first realize that the faith that was passed down to them is their own and they can claim it on their own. At one of the classes one of the students tentatively talked about a dream they had where they heard God tell them: you are not old enough yet, not just yet. They didn’t know what it meant so I gave them the story of Samuel to read, you know the story where Samuel hears the voice of the Lord and it takes Eli to explain to him that it was actually the Lord. Being able to confirm that we can actually overhear the voice of the Lord in the life of a middle schooler is exciting, exhilarating. I pray that young person will continue to seek out the voice of the Lord and when they hear it to continue to pursue and explore its meaning in their life

Today all of us have a chance to overhear the thoughts of God. Actually, every time that we open the Scriptures we have a chance to overhear the voice of the Lord. What a great concept, being able to step into the mind of God. Let me just stop for a moment. If you do not have a habit of reading Scripture, maybe it is intimidating, maybe it is something that is foreign to you, then this week start, just start, and begin by reading the Gospel of John, just one chapter a day. It is a tremendous opportunity to overhear the voice of God in your life.

In this Scripture in Genesis we have a chance to listen to the Holy Spirit talking to himself as He lays out the plans that He has made for Abraham. We almost feel guilty eavesdropping but through this Scripture we are able to learn how to discern the will of God by overhearing God’s thoughts that help us to understand God’s plans for our lives. Don’t you want to know what God has in store for you, don’t you want to be able to be sure as you go through life that you are following God’s plans. Today we get to see how.

We are in Genesis after that whole laughing scene has ended and God in three persons is leaving and heading out toward Sodom. If you have been to Israel and made your way down to the Dead Sea it is not hard to imagine where this took place. We went to a place where there was a high, thousands of feet high plateau looking down out over the dead sea where Sodom was. As Abraham sees them off the Lord lingers and Abraham obviously stays near him. We then find God talking to himself about what should he tell Abraham. Should I tell Abraham no, well. Now the only reason Abraham was able to overhear God was because he had stayed close to God and was in God's presence. In some ways we can say that he pursued God while God lingered. I know this is an anthropomorphic rendering of the Lord, but that's what makes this story so interesting. We find Abraham sticking around like a little brother not wanting to leave the side of the big brother while all of his friends are around.

The only way that we will ever be able to overhear God, to hear God's voice and plans for us is if we are in God's presence. Brother Lawrence was the subject of the seminal work called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. In it he encourages the readers to form a habit of conversing with God continually. And the only reason I bring him up is because those habits seem to be less and less prevalent among ordinary Christians, among us gathered here on Sunday morning. Abraham was a man of tremendous faith so much so that he remained in God's presence even to the point of overhearing God's thoughts.

What Abraham hears is God asking: should I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? No, because God doesn't want to keep us in the dark about anything, especially what he has planned for our lives. He wants us to know his will so that we can do his will. But again, without being in God's presence, without giving ourselves the chance we will not be able to hear God's will.

The reason God doesn't want to hide from Abraham what he is planning is because Abraham is his chosen one, the one who is to keep the way of the Lord. Abraham is God's preferred, chosen child. This is crucial in our understanding of who we are as Christians, as those chosen by God. We were chosen from the beginning of time by Christ to be His Body. God didn't choose anyone else but Abraham to lead the nations, just as Christ hasn't chosen anyone but his disciples to carry forward his way, the way of the Lord. This is reflected in the Matthew Scripture which drives some folks crazy because what in the world does it mean that many are called but few are chosen?

Instead of seeing these verses as a limiting exclusionary principle, see it as an offering that the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ is extended to all of us, God has chosen, but few have responded to that call. Few are willing to once called, once folded into the fellowship and into the family, few are willing to put on the habits and the lifestyles, and the mindset that is required to live out our vocation. A necessary part of that vocation is to constantly be in the presence of God so that we can overhear God's voice speak into our lives.

It sounds simple enough. If we go to God in prayer, in Scripture reading, then we will place ourselves in God's presence and we will be in the ideal place to overhear God talking to us or as in this case to himself about us. But it is so difficult these days to discern God's voice from all the other clutter and garbage and trash that we overhear and have to filter through around us. Tom Long told us a story of the first time that he had ever preached a sermon. He had spent hours preparing it and putting it together.

He got up in the pulpit and began preaching and they laughed when they were supposed to, and looked serious when they were supposed to, but then an unknown, unwanted and unexpected variable came into play. It was a hot day that Sunday and so the windows were open and the fans were on and in from one of the windows came a bumble bee that made slow, long, graceful circles right there in the middle of the sanctuary. He knew he had to make a forceful point so he looked down at his notes for his next line and when he looked up to make that point everybody was looking at that bumble bee.

Now that bumblebee had not done any exegesis, it had not prayed the whole night before for the Holy Spirit to guide him, it hadn't even cracked open the Bible but it was still getting all the attention, it was able to keep the people awake, and the Word of God was being missed, overlooked, falling on deaf ears because of the distraction that surrounded the people. It is difficult to overhear God in our midst when our minds and our ears are on the bumble bees, the temporal things of this world.

It seems that God's voice, the Holy Spirit is being drowned out by what I call the confusion or the cacophony or the dissonance of culture. The church used to provide the community with a purpose. Its message used to ring out loud and clear. Now it seems that the culture dictates to the church what it ought to stand for and believe and even what issues are most important.

One of the most startling times of realization for me that our faith, our religion, our beliefs have, for most people, no place in culture was during a discussion that I had during college. I helped form a group called life-force in college. This group stood behind what we called a consistent life ethic. We placed the highest value on life, the highest possible which in turn meant that we were opposed to abortion and also opposed to the death penalty. Basically, everyone on campus was mad at us and disagreed with us either on one or the other issue, but never both. But I remember one conversation that I got into and someone asked me if my religious convictions influenced what I believed about these issues, and I said of course. The response was a very angry “you should keep your religion out of it.” For some reason there is the thought that the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as you feel it blow in your life, affects only your spiritual life. Your secular, worldly life is free game. The most inane separation that I can think of is the separation between the sacred and the secular. Institutionally maybe, but not in our day to day decision making processes. Culture has a way of wanting to drown out our ability to overhear the Holy Spirit.

Another example of how our culture makes it difficult to hear God’s voice is how political views have replaced our religious views. For example, nowadays if we want to know where somebody stands in their faith what questions do we ask them? We ask them political questions that parties have taken one side or the other. Before a family joins a church nobody ever asks me, so do you believe that Christ is really present during communion? NO, instead the issues of homosexuality, abortion, gun control, immigration, etc. how did they ever become the deciding factors in our relationship with Jesus Christ? This is the culture dividing us into separate camps so that we would be at odds with each other. The Holy Spirit unites us as a community and allows us to stay unified by the act of the one who died on the cross for us so that we might, like Abraham, be the chosen people to lead people in the way of the Lord.

The culture of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a very different culture from the one in which we live. Allow yourselves the possibilities of staying close to God so that you will be able to overhear the Holy Spirit guiding and directing you in prayer. Our God does not capriciously hide his plans from us. The problem is that we are just hard of hearing because of the din that surrounds us. Today, in this sanctuary, be quiet and allow yourself to overhear God. We hear him talking to himself and he is saying that he has chosen us, not the society or the culture, but us to keep the way of the Lord.