

February 8, 2015

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

***"Have You Not Heard?"***

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 40:21-31 ~ Mark 1:29-39

Have you ever noticed how in the Bible people are always talking to God ... and that God talks back?! The prophets assert, "Thus saith the Lord," "The Lord called out," "The Word of the Lord came to me." How did they know that? Did they hear God speak in an audible voice? I've told some of you before my favorite joke by Lilly Tomlin ... "Why is it that when people talk to God they call it prayer, but when God talks to people they call it schizophrenia?" Well, sometimes the Bible says, God does speak in an audible voice.

Have you ever wondered what God's voice sounds like? Is it deep and booming like thunder rolling over the mountains ... or is it soft and gentle like rain on the roof? Maybe it's high and squeaky like fingernails on a chalk board. That would be disappointing, wouldn't it? I willing to bet that you imagine the voice of God as a male voice, but why couldn't God's voice be feminine? We took our Confirmation class to see "Exodus: Gods and Kings" and one of the most fascinating parts of the film was the portrayal of God as an 8 year old boy.

Has God ever spoken to you in an audible voice? I have to be honest and tell you, God has never spoken to me in an audible voice. Well ... except God has. You've heard the old saying "From your lips to God's ears?" What I've heard is "from God's heart to your lips." Things that flesh and blood people have spoken have been the word of the Lord to me at the time ... what I needed to hear for that moment ... some insight ... guidance ... comfort ... confrontation. Usually, people weren't intentionally trying to speak for God, but something they said in passing hit me like a lightning bolt and set me off in some new direction in my thinking or my doing. People who would never even darken the door of a church have served as the voice of God for me. And knowing that God has this way of speaking to us through *anybody* means that we have to be listening all the time for God to be speaking to us. All over the place the Bible tells us to listen up!

I believe that God knew I would always be in need of a good laugh so I was introduced to John. Here's a little proof of that in an e-mail John sent me once entitled "HOW TO CALL THE POLICE WHEN YOU'RE OLD AND DON'T MOVE FAST ANYMORE."

It seems that George Phillips, an elderly man, from Meridian, Mississippi, was going up to bed, when his wife told him that he'd left the light on in the garden shed, which she could see from the bedroom window. George opened the back door to go turn off the light, but saw that there were people in the shed stealing things.

He phoned the police, who asked, "Is someone in your house?"

He said "No, but some people are breaking into my garden shed and stealing from me."

Then the police dispatcher said, "All patrols are busy. You should lock your doors and an officer will be along when one is available."

George said, "Okay."

He hung up the phone and counted to 30.

Then he phoned the police again.

"Hello, I just called you a few seconds ago because there were people stealing things from my shed. Well, you don't have to worry about them now because I just shot them." and he hung up.

Within five minutes, six Police Cars, two Fire Trucks, a Paramedic, and an Ambulance showed up at the Phillips' residence, and caught the burglars red-handed.

One of the Policemen said to George, "I thought you said that you'd shot them!"

George said, "I thought you said there was nobody available!"

Yes, God does speak to me through others, but just as often God speaks to me in my own inner voice ... through my own internal dialogue ... which is pretty constant I must admit. Occasionally a thought will pop into my head, and I'll wonder, "Where did that come from?" Maybe it came from me. Maybe it came from God.

How can you really know for sure?

I think most of the time that God is silent ... and that in the silence of God is where we live. I believe God is listening *for* us ... listening *to* us ... as the psalmist says with no little amazement, "You hear me!" The silence of God is the space where we respond to the word we have already heard ... to the word God has already spoken ... to the embodied, crucified and risen Word of God, Jesus, the Christ. The silence of God is the pregnant moment when a question that has been asked is waiting for an answer ... when an invitation that has been given is waiting for a reply ... when a call that has gone out is waiting for a response. In the silence God waits for us ... God leans toward us ... God listens for our "yes!"

God has spoken, but we are all too often hard of hearing. "*Have you not known? Have you not heard?*" Isaiah asks the exiles. He says this because they are in a hard way ... cut off from their homeland ... from their Temple ... from their past and also their future. Exile is that experience of having no place where you feel at home ... no time when you feel safe ... and no hope that

things will ever be different. Exile is when you look back and feel grief ... then look forward and feel dread. Exile is depression, anxiety, despair, helplessness, hopelessness, loss of heart. In their time of exile, the people of Israel were saying, *"My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God."*

I know that feeling, don't you? I have had times like that in my life. I've even had days like that where I didn't feel at home with what's happening in this nation I love ... what's happening to senior adults and the mentally ill ... and children and the poor ... where I felt so disconnected from the culture around me and also too connected to the culture that at times I wanted to cry: "Where are you God? Why don't you do something to stop this? We're working hard here. We're trying to fight racism. We're trying to fight violence. We're trying to resist greed. We're trying to fight corruption. We're trying to care for the least of these ... to get out the good word about your love ... to get people to prize compassion over competition ... to find win-win solutions instead of always being us-against-them. We're trying to fly your flag of peace and justice and human harmony, but nobody's listening, least of all you! I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired because the world isn't getting any better and I'm thinking what's the use? *"My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God."*

Then the word of the Lord comes to me:

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.  
He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.  
Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted;  
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:28-31).*

These words from Isaiah are a severe mercy, a harsh comfort. They begin by putting us in our place. "Get over yourself, pipsqueak," they say. "There's only one God, and it's not you." But there is still a God, and that God is still in control of creation ... guiding it towards a good end. Rulers and nations rise and fall before God, but they are all mortal. They have a beginning and an end. God does not. That God is still at work, even if God's way is hidden from our sight. God will never give up. God will not burn out. God is the only super power ... period. Don't ever think you understand God or know God's ways. But God knows you. And God calls you, so God will give you the strength to do what you need to do.

Even the most vigorous among us wear out. And "fatigue makes cowards of us all," as John Claypool used to say. But Isaiah says,

*those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,*

*they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.*

Such beautiful language. Sometimes I feel so energized I'm flying high, soaring above the circumstances filled with hope and light and grace. Sometimes I run along at a steady pace for long periods of time. Life is a marathon and not a sprint. Sometimes all I can do is walk, just barely that sometimes, but I keep going, one step at a time, because I truly believe that,

*Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.*

From my experience on many Sunday mornings I got to wondering if Isaiah left one phrase out in this progression. I got to thinking maybe he left out, "*They shall sit and not fall asleep.*" But no, it's not in any of the ancient manuscripts. You won't find it in any of the modern translations. He must have left it out intentionally. Apparently we don't have the option of stopping, giving up, dropping out entirely. Whether we're soaring high or striding along or crawling in the mud, God calls us to keep moving forward. To quote Rabbi Tarfon from long ago, "*It is not given to you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.*" We can't do it all. We will burn out trying. But we can do our part. Just our part ... and that's enough. God will give us the strength to do our part ... to stay at it ... to keep moving forward.

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?* "How many times do I have to say this?" the prophet seems to ask. Well, yes, we ought to know better. Yes, we've heard all this a thousand times before. But our memory is weak and we need reminding. We forget, and get discouraged. We forget, and grow weary with well doing. We forget, and we have to remember. That is why we read the same scriptures again and again. That is why we come together weekly and tell the old, old story. That is why we gather at the table regularly and "Do this in remembrance" of Jesus. So are you listening? *Have you not known? Have you not heard?* What is God saying to you today?

May we pray?

Now, O Lord, bless our remembering. Speak to us in sound and in silence. Renew our strength. And we will follow you forward into the dominion of God, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.