

## LISTENING FOR GOD

“Listening for God” came out of a meditation I did last year for an ecumenical Lenten luncheon in Mellen. My theme was God is always sending us messages and we don’t have to wait for the afterlife for God’s presence to be felt or for God to do something that’s meaningful right now in our current life. I could see that saying God is always sending us messages struck a chord that kept people listening. So, I decided to do it again for you today with a different story prefacing the meditation.

The UCC calendar theme for this Sunday is tension in the wilderness and since the subdivision I live in is carved out of the surrounding woods, that sometimes causes tension for I am a dedicated tree-hugger and some of my neighbors would like the area to look less like a wilderness and more like a typical suburb. I hate the sound of a buzz saw. One morning I woke to the sound of a buzz saw very near. I opened the front door to see the two beautiful, fluffy, 75-foot-high trees next door being cut down limb from limb. As each limb was taken down, my anger grew until I was practically beside myself. How was I ever going to talk to my neighbors again without letting off steam, how was I ever going to walk by their house without vigorously shaking my head, how was I ever going to resist the temptation to go up and say, “Why did you cut down those trees?” I believe trees are an important part of God’s creation that helps keep our environment healthy and when they have taken years to grow, their beauty and magnificence reminds me of God’s own magnificence. So, if my neighbors had a minor reason for cutting those trees down, “like their sticky seeds are a nuisance,” I don’t know what words would come out of my mouth. While I was still fuming, the mail came and when I opened the door to my garage to go out to get mail, there was this big box with a bow on it. It was a birthday gift come two weeks early and inside was a vintage angel figurine with flowing hair and flounced skirts, nothing you’d think would have anything to do with the problem I was facing. And yet, something prompted me to turn it over and there was a message on the bottom, not a simple greeting-card message you’d think might be there, but a saying from the profound thinker Thoreau, stamped there 20 years ago and yet it fit so perfectly with what was going on, that it was like a direct answer from heaven to the words I had just been mumbling under my breath. It said, “We live not by judgment (and, boy, was I judging) but by grace.” Instantly, the anger flowed out of me and I felt calm—calm enough to hold my tongue until the woman who does my lawn, said, “You know I went over and asked your neighbor if he was going to plant new trees in his front yard and he said, “Not yet, because I am still mourning the loss of the old.” So, then I knew he loved those old trees, too. So, this is an example of how God can use even the most physical things around us by pushing them in front of us at precisely the right time and place and way to make us rethink how we are reacting to someone or something and change the direction we were going in.

But how do we know which message is really from God and which is simply coincidence or happenstance? The Bible helps us tune in to what to look for when we read about the life of Jesus—for instance, Luke 4:18 and the passage from Matthew 20: 1-16 we have today.

This meditation has a title and short prayer. The title— “Does God Still Produce Miracles in Today’s World?”

Jesus says in Luke 4:18, “The Spirit of the Lord...has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind....”

Jesus heals boredom and emptiness.

When we get bored with something, we stop seeing and hearing what's going on. A friend once said, "Once we think something is not relevant or someone is not like us, we stop listening."

In the Bible and life today, Jesus heals blindness, deafness and the people help back by our lack of interest when he switches on our imagination and turns our usual idea of things upside down. The effect is not so different from what happens when we rearrange the furniture in our homes to include something new we just bought. When we put a new lamp next to the sofa, it looks drab and we think we should take it back, but when we see that lamp next to an armchair, it's totally transformed and looks beautiful.

So, too, sometimes God changes the way we string together what we think we hear someone is saying or who we think a person is. Like believing the new school principal who arrived to meet the teachers on roller skates the first day was trying to show off how much she wasn't like anybody else. But perhaps she was just doing something fun to break the ice like someone else would start off telling a joke. Thinking of it as being silly to break the ice instead of trying to show how unusual she was in order to impress people might require the rearrangement of the way our minds take in things. Same way with today's parable of the landowner who took pity on those who waited all day for a job, terrified they'd come home with nothing in their pockets, whereas we'd think, "Why pay full-price for somebody who hardly worked!" So, letting Jesus in to rearrange the way we see things might prevent us from getting angry over something we didn't put in the right context or it might make us take someone seriously so that they feel loved and that they truly belong. That's one of God's greatest miracles.

Prayer: O God fire up our imaginations so that we may see more and more people the way you see them and joyfully welcome them in from the sidelines. Amen.

I thought I was done thinking about how we can sensitize ourselves to receive more of the messages God sends us. But no. Preparations for the Wisconsin Conference Annual Meeting were gathering steam and they started me right off again. The Conference began to advertise the person who was going to conduct the Intensive Workshop that takes place before the Annual Meeting proper, Rev. Matt Miofsky. I thought, "Who's that?" and looked him up on-line. I found he was the lead pastor of "The Gathering," a Methodist church that is very innovative and has lots of satellites. I even went further and listened to one of his most recent sermons and that inspired me to write a follow-up meditation and here it is.

In his sermon, "Sent," Rev. Miofsky says that the everyday thing we wrestle with—loss, grief, parenting, disappointment, finding purpose in life, relating to others are all deeply spiritual and we don't have to deal with them alone. Jesus can help us, guide us, calm us. How does Jesus do that when he doesn't usually speak directly into our ears. Well, even those who take the Bible most literally have found that the same story or saying in the Bible changes to fit what is currently going on in their lives and when an insight that comes from everyday life mimics something that happened in the Bible, it must be guidance from Jesus. But I believe Jesus enters our lives to guide us or open our minds to a change needed to overcome a barrier to our goals or God's plan for us in other ways, too. For me, the most striking messages from God come right in the midst of a tweet, conversation, speech or sermon that I didn't particularly like or disagree with and then suddenly some word that person says takes on a life of its own that takes hold of me and jars my mind off its usual track. And in the new direction my imagination takes me, I find the key to something I have been struggling with for ages—such as how to connect with neighbors who have different interests than me. You don't have to take up everything a speaker believes is so, just what helps you understand what you never understood before.

Take football. Watching football in the late '60's with my boyfriends bored me to tears. The TV cameras couldn't do many close-ups of the action those days, so all it looked like to me was players running and getting into big clumps and then running again and getting in still bigger clumps. I thought, "How can anybody be so interested in that?" Then, one day, I was at a graduation listening to someone droning away and then he gives an example of a strategic play in football to lock down what he had been saying. I sat up because I love to strategize. Once I saw that football is very much a game of strategy and saw it played out at ground level in high school football, I became to love football. You can imagine how many people I let into my life when I realized that.

When I get a life-changing insight smack-dab in the middle of something I was ready to tune out, well, to me it's God that's behind that message because it reminds me that the God who made worlds come into being out of nothing is still making something precious come out of what I think is nothing. And that has kept me from turning away from people too quickly—not always, but more than there otherwise would have been. So, I am on the lookout for a message from God when I am tempted to shut out what someone says. Because I know the person who doesn't get listened to is not likely to feel loved. That's why I search for anything that helps me be as loving in God's name as I can be.