

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, January 15, 2006

I Samuel 3:1-20, John 1:43-51, (Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18)

“HERE I AM, LORD”

Years ago, there was a church sign on the Avenue of the Cities that I argued with every time I drove by it. (2005) The sign frustrated me so much that I'd catch myself saying things out loud to the sign, alone in my car. Hopefully no one was watching me!

No, I don't remember what church it was, but for about a month its sign read: "God always waits for us to make the first move."

Every time I've read it, I'd think I need to use this sign in a sermon,
because it is perpetrating a horrible lie about God and about faith,
and I don't want anyone to believe this sign.

When I came to this morning's two stories, I remembered the sign and knew it was time to talk about it.

With the words: "God always waits for us to make the first move," this sign makes it seem like God is waiting in the wings,

captive to our whims and choices,

our fickle human decisions about belief, faith and turning toward God.

It also makes God into some kind of vindictive judge,

who won't give us anything, or be with us,

unless we first show some sign of interest and "make the first move."

This sign also really bugs me because we as Christians are called to invite people in who haven't yet heard the Good News.

But God's love gets distorted by this kind of Christianity.

There is really nothing inviting about this God.

Who would really want to inquire about a God who is already judging us before we even act,

and then holding some kind of cosmic stopwatch to see how long it takes for us to turn toward God?

This morning's two stories from the Old and New Testaments argue with this sign about a very different understanding of God, and how God speaks in our lives.

In the Old Testament story, Samuel was a young boy, some believe around 12 years of age, when God spoke and made him the next prophet who would speak to the nation of Israel.

We read in his story in verse 7 that "Samuel not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him."

Now, of course Samuel knew God in the sense that he lived and served in the Temple in Jerusalem,

but the direct contact between God and Samuel had not yet taken place,

and Samuel had not yet been told what to prophesy.

It takes God speaking, and Eli telling Samuel that God is speaking,

for Samuel to begin to recognize God's voice.

It takes Eli telling Samuel what to say: "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening," for Samuel to know how to talk to God.

Samuel, a young Jewish boy, hears God and with help to hear and understand, he responds: "Here I am Lord!"

In the New Testament in John's gospel, Philip, and later his brother Nathaniel, did not go in search of Jesus. Jesus comes to them saying "Follow me."

What's so amazing about this story is that this is exactly what Philip and Nathaniel do. They leave their work, they leave their families, they leave the lives they've always known and they follow Jesus.

Contrary to that church sign's guilt-producing statement that God won't do anything in our lives until we do something, or say something, or act in a certain way first, the lives of Samuel, and Philip and Nathanael show us God acting first.

God called to Samuel in the night even when Samuel didn't know God yet.

Jesus invited Philip and Nathaniel to follow, while Philip and Nathaniel were not expecting the Messiah to walk up to them.

In response to God's call, sometimes with help from other believers, they were able to respond.

This is a very basic belief for us as Christians who are part of the Reformed tradition. We believe that we come to know God, we become people of faith, we come to love God because:

God comes to us first,

God loves us first,

God chooses us first,

God speaks to us, so we can learn how to speak to God.

This is why we begin our worship services each Sunday with a Call to Worship. It is a reminder, from the very beginning of our time together each Sunday, that it is God who leads each one of us. It is God who invites and guides us to come to worship,

After the Call to Worship, we then respond to God and our response is praise, it's thanksgiving, as we realize who God is in our lives,

which is why following the Call to Worship, we usually sing a hymn of praise to God.

And you can rest assured that we will do that once again when we return to in-person worship, and safely sing again.

Our order of worship follows the story of faith, and it is based on the basic conviction that our God is an inviting, welcoming God who acts first.

If I could rewrite that sign on the Avenue of the Cities for each one of you, and our neighbors who drive by our church, and then put it on our sign for this Sunday morning I would want it to say something like:

"God is calling to you, would you like help learning how to answer?"

Or: "Not sure you hear God's voice, let us listen with you?!"

Or: Wondering how to say "Here I am Lord?", come learn stories from others who found the way."

Or: "We're working together to answer God's invitations, will you come help us?"

We need each other to hear God, we sometimes need each other to answer God, we often need each other to see practical steps in faith, to be followers of our inviting God.

Just think of the stories that surround us in our family of faith! We need to tell each other these stories, we need to share the ways we've heard God call us. We need to share our uncertainties, our beliefs, and our desire to serve God.

I know in my own life I've developed an ear for hearing God speaking to me by learning from colleagues and church members who've helped me listen. And I've been helped by some who have given me a nudge when it is clearly time for me to say: "Here I am Lord."

On this weekend of honoring the non-violent work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., just think of the stories of we know of the Christians who were active in the Civil Rights movement, beginning with Dr. King.

I think especially of Rosa Parks and her weariness with being sent to the back of the bus. Her refusal to move one more time came from her deep convictions about God's love for her, and for all God's people, no matter the color of their skin.

When I heard her speak at Tiger Stadium in Detroit in 1990, during the appearance of Nelson Mandela following his release from prison, I was struck by her humility, and her ongoing commitment to speak for a nonviolent resistance and racial justice.

Her humility was especially evident as all the dignitaries and performers got into their stretch limos at the end of the night, and I watched as Rosa Parks got into a police car with one of Metro Detroit's police officers, who drove her home to her house there in the Tiger Stadium neighborhood. She didn't need a limo.

I think of Ruby Bridges parents who cared enough about their daughter to teach her the strength and power that faith and prayer could bring to her. They responded to God by helping the next generation hear God's voice.

I think of my friends Bob and Joan from northern Minnesota.

In the 60's Bob lived and served in Mississippi. Bob was a young Presbyterian pastor, the Director of the Delta Ministry of the National Council of Churches with the Hattiesburg Ministers' Project.

He helped register people to vote, helped organize Civil Rights marches, and helped with other community organizing and ministries for the Hattiesburg community.

He was literally standing up to white supremacists and to the Ku Klux Klan.

He experienced taunts and jeers and received death threats, because he was a follower of Jesus Christ who had said "Here I am Lord, use me!"

20 years ago, while Joan and I attended a Presbyterian Educator's conference, Bob was at Northwestern University delivering his writings and journals from the 1960's to them. They are now in the University's archives for others to learn about those early days of the Civil Rights movement first-hand.

I am so proud of my friends for the ways they answered God's call to love all of God's people, and for the ways they worked for true justice.

Something happens when we let ourselves respond to the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives. And it often isn't the huge spectacular things that happen, it's the little things that change our

ways of living:

I see it happen in your lives:

I see you struggling with integrity to understand where you need to go next in your lives,

I see you struggling with integrity to live and speak in these painfully difficult days,

I see you give with such energy to our commissions and the boards of Deacons and Elders,
even from a distance.

In the pre-Covid days I watched you welcome new people and help them settle into our life together. And I know that I will watch you do this again.

You as a church are known for your friendliness.

I see you say "Here I am Lord" as you:

help teach Sunday school and Youth Sunday School while we are distanced,

as you help me lead worship through words and music, as we tape it,

so that our family of faith can worship together by YouTube on Sundays,

I see you say "Here I am Lord" as you:

as you call each other and check in with each other in these lonely days of the world pandemic,

as you run errands, pick up supplies and drive people to appointments,

as you begin the journey of our Year With the Bible,

as you learn together and share from your lives at the Presbyterian Women's Zoom Bible Study,

as you listen and support each other at our Sunday Gatherings

and as you pray for each other and support each other in ways seen and unseen you continue to say "Here I am Lord."

There is no question that God calls to each one of us first,
inviting us to come and learn about God,
inviting us to deepen our faith,
to speak to and for those in need,
inviting us to come and worship,
and inviting us to trust that God will guide our steps.

We can love, because God first loved us,

We can serve, because God first served us,

We can say "yes, here I am Lord," because God first said "yes!" to us.

I invite you to turn to the words in your bulletins and let us sing our commitment to our calling God with the hymn: "Here I am Lord".

(see 06-01-15)