

“His Voice”

Matthew 4:12-23

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One of the books, or series of books, that I loved when I was younger was James Herriot’s “All Creatures Great and Small.” These books tell the story of his life as a veterinarian in the Yorkshire section of England in the 1930s. They showcase the charming and difficult life that vets had visiting the rural farms around Yorkshire. Although he wrote in a humorous style, the difficult and frankly, disgusting parts of dealing with large animals cured me of ever wanting to be a vet. But one of the stories that I have remembered is one that took place in the spring right after the new lambs had been born. Herriot and his assistant went out to a large farm where there were hundreds of new lambs that needed to be checked out and vaccinated. So they gathered all the lambs into a large barn and took care of the vaccinations, but they soon realized that they had taken hundreds of lambs from their mothers and now had all these tiny lambs in a barn with hundreds of ewes standing outside the barn plaintively baaing to get their babies back. How were they going to get the right lamb reunited with the right ewe? All these lambs that look and sound exactly the same, how were their mothers going to tell? It was going to take hours and hours for them to figure out which lamb went with which sheep. They ended up just opening the door to the barn and letting them sort it out themselves. It took about 30 seconds. The lambs quickly found their mothers or the other way around, and they walked contently back into the field. Somehow, between their look, and their sound and their smell, each lamb knew its mother and each ewe knew her child. From the moment of birth the sound and scent of the lamb are imprinted in the mother’s memory and the sound and scent of the mother are imprinted in the lamb.

I wonder if it works that way with us. Not with our human mothers and children, but with God.

The story today from Matthew is one that has always interested me. It describes the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He has been baptized by John and spent some time in the wilderness thinking about what is to come, and now it is time to gather some disciples. One day he is walking beside the Sea of Galilee and he calls to four men, two sets of brothers. He sees them out in their boats and he calls out to Peter and Andrew and to James and John and says, "Come, follow me." And they do. That's what amazes me, I guess. Matthew says that they immediately leave what they are doing and they follow him. They drop everything and follow him. Why? It's almost as if they had been waiting all their lives to hear this voice, to be called to do something different, that it somehow touched something deep within them. And so they follow him.

Can you imagine doing that? What would make someone do that? What could make you do that? Could you drop everything and go do something vastly different from what you are doing now? Could you leave your profession, your family, your home, and go try something totally different, just because someone said, "Come with me." Maybe you could. Maybe you already have. When I went to college, I was torn about what I was going to do, what kind of career I wanted, what kind of career God was calling me to. I was either going to go into medicine, but I wasn't really sure I wanted to work with people that much, or I was going to go into forestry and perhaps work for the Parks Service, but I wasn't really sure I wanted to work without people that much. But somewhere along the line, I heard a voice. Or perhaps I had a vision. Or something happened to me to convince me to change everything in my life. For me, it was taking a class on the New Testament and working with a bunch of 7th and 8th graders at a local church.

Somewhere along the line, I realized that as terrified as I was of the idea of preaching and teaching, that's exactly what God wanted me to do. Did I "immediately drop my nets and follow

him?” Well, not immediately. But pretty quickly. Quickly enough that it surprised my parents who were probably looking forward to their son, the doctor.

What do you think the families of the first disciples felt? We know Peter was married and we just heard that James and John left their father in the boat. What did they say to their families? “Here you handle the family business for a few years while I go walk around the country with this guy?” Or did they say, “I’ve heard a voice, and I think I’m supposed to do something different.”

St. Augustine opens the first book of his “Confessions” with the prayer and the statement that “our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” It would seem that these four men who were already in a worthy vocation had restless hearts—so restless that when they heard Jesus’ call to them, they could do nothing else but leave everything behind and follow. Perhaps they were simply replying to what had been imprinted on their souls from birth—the knowledge of the voice of God—so that when they heard the voice, all they could do was obey.¹

I wish it was that easy. It seems in the world today that it is complicated, listening to the voice, actually, listening to the voices. Because there are so many voices that call to us, claiming to know us, to know what our lives should be about. How do we discern which voice is His voice? It would be easy if we were like the sheep. But maybe we are more like the sheep than we know. Maybe we do know his voice. Elsewhere in scripture Jesus says that his sheep know him, that they hear his voice and follow him. Among all the voices calling for our attention, how do we know his? Maybe its not that hard. In the Hebrew Scriptures the prophet asks us if it is all that hard, because he has told us in simple terms what the voice of God says, “to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God.” If the voice calling to us says something different from

1 Nishioka, Rodger. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*.p. 286.

that, it is not the voice of God. In the words of Jesus, which of the voices coming to us, telling us what to do is the greatest? “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” You shall love God and love each other, and love the stranger who comes into your life. Do you wonder what to do, which voice to follow? If that voice does not tell you to love, do not follow it.

We are called above all to follow the person of Jesus Christ. We are called to know him, to know him so well that we are able to discern his voice from among the cacophony of voices in our lives and in our world. That may seem like a daunting task, but I hope it is not really. We have been created in God's image. That means that we are imprinted with the ability to know him when we hear his voice just like the lambs know their mother. And God is love. If we hear a call to hatred or to injustice or to selfishness or to intolerance, I think we can be sure it is not His voice.