What Gets Your Attention? Peace Presbyterian Church

Mark 1:14-20 3rd after Epiphany

Elizabeth M. Deibert 21 January 2024

What gets your attention? The delightful smell of onions simmering in the kitchen? What gets your attention? A gorgeous sunset in the late afternoon, making you praise God for the wonder of creation. What gets your attention? Is it that pain in your knee or back making your wince? Maybe it is a nice compliment paid to you by someone who noticed your attractive shirt or something kind and helpful you did.

Think about your phone and how it gets your attention. Are you a pick it up now or save it for a good moment person? Do you have special ringtones for family? When you get that text message ding, are you secretly looking, even if you are talking to someone else in person? What news gets your attention? Bad news, disasters usually garner more attention, so that’s why there’s so much sensationalized bad news to watch. What about news pushes on your phone? Are they taking you away from other thoughts constantly? Are you reading email on your phone all day long? Some of us keep our phone silenced most of the time, so that our lives are not constantly interrupted. Phones can run our lives all day long – for good or for ill.

Don Deibert had a devotional app that played alleluias to call him to spiritual attention. Richard and I enjoyed keeping his phone charged up and thinking of Don when those would go off two or three times per day. I try to be in a state of constant prayer, so I am listening for God more than the anxious voices in my head, more than the demanding voices all around me.

Many of us feel overwhelmed by the attention grabbers constantly coming after us all day? I remember when the kids were little and someone was always saying “Mommy, mommy!” I watch now as a grandmother my children encouraging their children to learn to wait and notice that mommy is on the phone, busy. “Don’t interrupt please,” they remind my grandchildren.

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark is about Jesus calling all people to repentance --- repentance means literally turning back toward God. After giving that invitation, he made another which clearly got the attention of some guys who were working as fishermen. Unlike the story of Jonah in the Hebrew scriptures, which we might have read today, the fisherfolk responded and went immediately. Jonah tried to escape the call of God. He did not want to go to Ninevah for the unpleasant task of telling people to change their ways. He himself ran the other way and instead of fishing for people, he got fished by the big fish. It is a funny story about what happens when God does not first get your attention, how God will continue to persist and will always be more merciful than we can imagine. God is so determined to connect with us that God came as Jesus Christ to walk this life with us, with all its ups and downs. What a compelling presence, God in human flesh must have been. Prayer: Silence in us every voice but your own, and hearing you, help us to have the courage to follow you in life and in death. Amen.

**Mark 1:14-20**

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." 16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea-- for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.  (NRS)

“See ya later, Dad. We’re going with this rabbi.” They did not know where they were going. Did they understand what Jesus meant when he spoke of fishing for people? They must have had some notion of capturing the hearts, minds, and souls of people. They were taking the first step forward without seeing the staircase. That’s faith, according to Dr. Martin Luther King. “Faith is taking the first step forward when you cannot see the whole staircase.”

Sometimes people will say, “I’m not sure how to follow Jesus because you know, it’s not like it was in the first century. I don’t have Christ standing in front of me.” No, you have something even better. You have the Spirit of Christ living in you – going with you wherever you go.

But wait a minute, you might say. I don’t feel the Spirit. I don’t hear the Spirit. I don’t see the Spirit. When we have trouble hearing the voice of God guiding us with a particular decision, it is most likely due to the fact that we are not constantly cultivating an openness to God’s will. Jonah probably said the same thing when he was on that boat sailing away from God. He’s saying, “I don’t know. I’ve been praying and trying to figure out what God wants me to do, but I just can’t get a clear message from God.” So God makes it clearer from the sticky icky belly of a fish. And God gives you another chance, and another chance, and another chance to do what is right, to pay attention to the whispers of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit in your head is like that really quiet person in a meeting when all the boisterous people are talking non-stop. “Oh, here’s what we need to do.” And another interrupts and says, “No, wait. Have you considered this?” And another pipes in and says, “Really, let me tell you how it is.” And all those competing loyalties are sounding off in your head, and nobody in there is listening for the quiet voice of the Spirit.

Mother Teresa says, “God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening in the beginning of prayer.” Pope Francis says, “Obeying God is listening to God and having an open heart to follow the path that God points out.” It is a challenge to listen to God. There are so many voices going off in my head – even if when I put my cell phone on silent and ignore my email.

It has been an incredibly busy January at Peace, and sometimes when we are busiest, we are depending heavily on God and listening. But other times we get very busy in a distracted sort of way, and our prayer life is diminished. Am I quiet enough to hear God’s still small voice?

Yesterday around 5:00, our little dog, a Cavachon named Archie ran away while we were working on a project in the garage. By the time we realized it, he was roaming the neighborhoods nearby. We were searching and calling him for three hours, but he was too far away and distracted by all the sights and sounds of this newfound freedom. He was nearly run over by a car on SR 70 we later learned from the woman who picked him up, after nearly hitting him. I don’t want to be like Archie, risking my life, making bad choices, getting so far from my God that I cannot find my way back home, cannot hear the sound of my master’s voice. “Whether I hear God’s call or not depends on the condition of my ears, and exactly what I hear depends upon my spiritual attitude.” Says Oswald Chambers.

Is God getting your attention? Or is everything else in life getting in the way of listening? There are the big call moments related to vocation – as Mary Oliver puts it…”Tell me, what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” There are many big decisions along the way – what to study, where to work, whom or if to marry. Frederick Buechner wisely said of our vocation, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

In addition to the large vocational choices, there are daily choices of going or not going with God. All these many small decisions make quite an impact when you stack them all up. Will I do what I know to be right and true and faithful – just today? Will I make some quiet time with all screens off to listen for God’s voice in scripture, in creation, in prayer and meditation, in the love of family and friends? Will I approach this day with awareness of who is in charge of my life? Not me! If I try to take charge of my life, I will be like a little dog, dodging cars on SR 70. Sometimes, the call of God thwarts other plans, or we have to make big sacrifices, but God is always teaching us something, making us more equipped for Christian service, and sometimes by hardship. God’s ways are higher than our ways. Put down your phone. Drop your busyness. Be still and quiet enough to let God get your attention today.