First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

January 22, 2023

Who’s Calling?

Matthew 4:12-25 - MSG

12-17When Jesus got word that John had been arrested, he returned to Galilee. He moved from his hometown, Nazareth, to the lakeside village Capernaum, nestled at the base of the Zebulun and Naphtali hills. This move completed Isaiah’s revelation: Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, road to the sea, over Jordan, Galilee, crossroads for the nations.

People sitting out their lives in the dark saw a huge light;

Sitting in that dark, dark country of death, they watched the sun come up. This Isaiah-prophesied revelation came to life in Galilee the moment Jesus started preaching. He picked up where John left off: “Change your life. God’s kingdom is here.”

18-20Walking along the beach of Lake Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers: Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew. They were fishing, throwing their nets into the lake. It was their regular work. Jesus said to them, “Come with me. I’ll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I’ll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass.” They didn’t ask questions, but simply dropped their nets and followed. 21-22A short distance down the beach they came upon another pair of brothers, James and John, Zebedee’s sons. These two were sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, mending their fishnets. Jesus made the same offer to them, and they were just as quick to follow, abandoning boat and father. 23-25From there he went all over Galilee. He used synagogues for meeting places and taught people the truth of God. God’s kingdom was his theme—that beginning right now they were under God’s government, a good government! He also healed people of their diseases and of the bad effects of their bad lives. Word got around the entire Roman province of Syria. People brought anybody with a sickness, whether mental, emotional, or physical. Jesus healed them, one and all. More and more people came, the momentum gathering. Besides those from Galilee, crowds came from the “Ten Towns” across the lake, others up from Jerusalem and Judea, still others from across the Jordan.

One of my favorite memes on Facebook shows Jesus speaking to a crowd of people and Jesus is saying, “Pay attention, gang, I don’t want four different versions of what I’m about to say getting out there!”

Well, needless to say, it doesn’t look like the Gospel writers were paying attention, and so we do indeed have four distinct versions of Jesus’ life and ministry. While we understand that each of the four Gospel writers were addressing very different audiences, each writing in such a way to tailor the message, so that it would resonate with their particular audience, there can be a sense of dissonance, when we read two very different narratives of the same event.

That’s where I found myself, when comparing John’s description of Jesus calling his first disciples, which we heard last week, with Matthews version in today’s reading. Now, I could preach an entire sermon on why these two versions are so different, but I’ve already given myself a headache, trying to reconcile these differences, so I’m going to put John’s version aside, for now, and focus on the way Matthew relates this event.

The first thing we need to look at, even though it doesn’t appear in this version, is the timeline. Matthew completely skips the 40-day period, after Jesus’ baptism, where Jesus is in the wilderness being tempted by Satan, which is recorded by the writers of both Mark and Luke. Remember, though, that Matthew was writing for a primarily Jewish audience and his goal was to convince Jews that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. So, Matthew would have been aware of the Jewish understanding of Satan, which is that Satan is ultimately subordinate to God and can only act with God’s permission. That understanding raises some very interesting possibilities, which we’ll explore at another time. Today, though, I think Matthew chose to leave the temptation narrative out, in order to keep from muddying up the waters. Matthew, instead, chooses to move directly to John the Baptist’s arrest and what Jesus did when he heard that his cousin had been imprisoned.

We don’t know how much time elapsed between Jesus’ baptism and where today’s reading picks up the story, but Matthew takes great pains to tell us about Jesus relocating from Nazareth to Capernaum, in order to help his readers understand that Jesus’ actions fulfilled another one of Isaiah’s prophecies. This is right in line with Matthew’s overall goal of proving to his readers that Jesus was the Messiah.

The second thing we need to understand is that, at this point, Jesus wasn’t well known. A few folks knew who Jesus really was, but that number was actually quite small. So, when Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and tells Andrew and Simon that he will make them fishers of people, how did they know that this was the Messiah? I mean they heard what Jesus said and *without question,* dropped everything and followed him. Same thing with James and John; who does that and, honestly, how *did* they know?

We have the advantage of 20/20 hindsight, and we understand that it must have been the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of all four of these men. Why else would these men, who had good jobs, homes and families, give it all up to follow a complete stranger?

There’s a third thing to note, here. There were any number of men (and yes, they would have all been men) running around all over the place, claiming to be the Messiah, which is translated as the Anointed One. Each one with their own adherents and disciples. It’s a pretty safe bet that Simon, Andrew, James and John had, at the very least, heard about these various claims so, again, how did they know that Jesus was the actual Messiah and not some fake?

Fast forward 2,000 years, and we find ourselves faced with a similar conundrum. Turn on the TV at any given moment, day or night, and you’ll find televangelists shilling for money. Send a donation to this or that ministry, and God will heal you of everything that is wrong with you. The heresy that is the Prosperity Gospel continues to gain popularity. Being wealthy, according to proponents of Prosperity Gospel, proves that God loves you. If you’re poor well, that just means you don’t have enough faith.

Now, let me be clear. There’s nothing wrong with donating money to a worthy ministry and there’s nothing wrong with being wealthy. But when we’re asked to donate money to a ministry, just so someone can ride around in a multimillion-dollar private jet, or when we find ourselves judging someone else’s faith based solely on their bank account, then I think the Gospel message has been twisted beyond all recognition.

So back to the question of how do we know? How do we know that the voice we hear, is from God and not from something, or someone else? How do we cut through all of the noise and bluster, in order to get to, and stay on, the right path?

I have a process that I’ve come to trust, over the years, which helps me decide if it’s the Holy Spirit speaking or if it’s my own ego trying to take control. And believe me, when I say this, my ego loves to take control and be in charge. When it’s my ego telling me to go down a certain path, nothing, and I do mean nothing, about the journey is ever easy. Roadblocks come up, obstacles get thrown into my path and the whole thing becomes a tangled mess. Now, being human, I will often push through and force something to happen, but the reality is that it inevitably ends badly for me when that happens.

When I listen to the Holy Spirit, though, I’ve found the results to be a bit different. Everything seems to fall into place, as if by magic, obstacles and roadblocks seem to melt away and, most importantly for me, there’s an internal sense of “rightness” to the entire endeavor, if you will.

The other piece, for me, is that when it’s the Holy Spirit calling me to do something, it becomes all I can think about, day or night, and it simply will not let up until I take action. That certainly was the case when I was figuring out whether or not to apply to become your pastor. I had never heard of Soda Springs, Idaho, before my sister married her husband and moved to Bancroft. Honestly, my first reaction, when I saw the church’s Ministry Information Form, was, “Really God?” “Idaho?” “It’s cold in the winter and I haven’t dealt with snow for 40 years.” “Are you kidding me?” So yes, I resisted, but God though the voice of the Holy Spirit, didn’t stop, just because I pushed back. It drove me nuts, frankly. But now, I know that coming here was exactly what God planned for me, and it has been the best decision of my entire life.

Discerning God’s will; cutting through the noise and knowing that it’s really God speaking to us, through the Holy Spirit, isn’t easy. When you’re not sure if it’s God calling you, or your ego trying to trip you up, step back, take a deep breath, find someplace where you can shut out all of the distractions that we all deal with in our modern world, and sit in silence with God, for a bit. Tell your ego to sit down and shut up and open yourself up to hearing God’s call. Meditate on Psalm 46:10, which tells us to, “Be still and know that I am God.” Truthfully, I can think of no better advice to offer you, today.

For me, being still and simply listening, involves more than just reading a passage from the Bible. Being still, in this context, is making a conscious decision to take action, in order to open myself up to whatever God, through the voice of the Holy Spirit, is trying to tell me.

So, folks, be still and know that God is God and when God calls, you’ll know it’s legit and not your ego trying to scam you. AMEN