

The Third Church Pulpit
Sermons from Third Presbyterian Church
Rochester, New York

Listening and Comprehending

Ernest F. Krug

February 10, 2019



Ernest F. Krug

Listening and Comprehending

February 10, 2019

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 6:1-13

Luke 5:1-11

Let me tell you about a young man who experienced God's call. He was working with his father in a small computer company, and the work produced a decent income. He wasn't married and had no children to look after, so he was relatively free to respond to a call that would take him in a different direction. One day he went to hear a new preacher in town and was immediately drawn to him. The man spoke with authority, and he preached a message of freedom that struck a chord. The young man felt burdened by his responsibilities, and he began thinking about new possibilities. He returned several times to hear the preacher speak, but preferred just to listen. He could dream about the possibilities in this message of freedom but still stick with the job he had and its reliable income. On one occasion he had spent the entire day calling on people to sell his product with no success. Later that afternoon he drove his truck over to the place where the preacher was speaking. The preacher asked to use the bed of the truck as a platform, and the young man readily agreed. The sermon was a powerful call to a life of obedience to God's command to love others and to trust in God's care.

The preacher stepped down from the truck. He then asked the young man to make a call to the governor's office about the product his company was selling. It seemed ridiculous to do that; the young man had already pursued many government leads. But he made the call. Surprisingly, his call was directed to the governor's desk, and the governor took the call. By the end of the conversation the young man had a commitment from the governor to buy his product for the entire state. He calculated that revenues for his company would jump 10,000%! The young man was totally awestruck. He had heard about the "prosperity gospel," but this was a miracle! He returned to the preacher and felt shaky as he said to him, "I don't know who you are or what connections you have, but you have just made me a very rich man." The preacher responded, "If you want to be rich in the eyes of God, leave the billion dollar company in your father's hands. You come join me, and we will help people understand God's love for them and the freedom that brings to serve others, particularly those most in need." "Who, me? You can't be serious. My skill is in making a particular computer component, and you opened the way for my company to take off. Now you want me to leave that behind and work with you? You're a preacher! That's not for me."

Most of you have gathered that this is my modern day version of Simon Peter's call by Jesus. In Peter's case, he did, in fact, leave the miraculous catch that occurred after Jesus told him to put down his nets one more time. James and John, his partners in the fishing business, were also persuaded to follow this new way of life. And the emphasis is on a new way of functioning in the world. The big question for you and me is this: Does this call apply only to Peter and others who go into professional ministry, or does it have broad application. Does it, in fact, apply to all of us?

Let me phrase the question differently. If we believe that God calls each of us to some meaningful work to support what God is doing in the world, how should we understand what

that means as a practical matter? The scripture in Luke 5 and the Isaiah passage we heard earlier give us some clues. Peter is convinced that he should change the way he is leading his life not by Jesus' words and not by Jesus' ability to heal people. Remember, in the previous chapter of Luke, Jesus had healed Peter's mother-in-law. Clearly, Peter and Jesus knew each other, and Peter had heard Jesus' message. He becomes convinced that he should follow this man because of the abundance of the catch in waters that, hours before, contained no fish. This experience of unexpected abundance over which he has no control persuades Peter that he is in the presence of a holy intrusion into his reality. He has listened to God's word, just as we do when we listen to scripture, but now he comprehends it. He could not comprehend it through hard work; it came through obedience to a request from Jesus to go out again into deep water. And the catch of fish had nothing to do with achieving material success. It had everything to do with demonstrating Jesus' authority as divine presence in our reality. And reality is an individual perception. In each of our realities Jesus is a divine presence calling us and encouraging us.

So, what does it mean to follow a divine command that appears to have no chance of achieving any desirable result? Recall Isaiah's experience. He is certain about God's presence in the world, and he is certain about his failure to serve God faithfully. His conclusion: "I am lost." Isaiah is then reassured about God's forgiveness when the seraph, a divine being, comes to him in a vision, touches his lips with a burning ember, and declares that he is forgiven of anything that separates him from God. Isaiah then commits himself to doing whatever God needs to have him do on God's behalf. The task he is given proves to be very difficult. The message he is given for Israel is a recipe for rejection. He is to tell the people that they will listen but not comprehend, keep looking for truth but not understand it. All their cities will be destroyed, all the people who survive will be taken away, everything in

the country will be burned and whatever is not consumed by fire will be burned again. That is a dismal message, indeed. Imagine the reception here if John or I gave such a message from this pulpit.

Jesus' message also carries judgment. When he goes to his synagogue in Nazareth, described in Luke 4: 16-30, Jesus tells the people that God wants him to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight for those who can't see the truth, and freedom for all who are oppressed. The people initially commend him. They think he's talking about them—their feelings of oppression, their feelings of needing liberation by a messiah. However, he soon points out that this message is for all people, not just those who think they have a special relationship with God and not just for those who believe in a manifest destiny that gives them an edge on other nations. When the people hear that, they are ready to throw Jesus off a cliff. This is the man Peter chooses to follow.

I believe that God's calls each one of us. The call is to be part of God's activity to give hope to people in poverty, release to people held captive, recovery of sight to those who can't see, and freedom to those who are oppressed by the structures of their societies. You might experience a call as dramatic as Isaiah's vision or Peter's experience of divine power and its abundance, or it may be something quite ordinary. In each case, what you have listened to in scripture from the mind of God is suddenly comprehended. You experience God's judgment on yourself and your society, as Isaiah and Simon Peter did, but also the hope that comes with the awareness of divine presence transforming you and the world. You see, a call from God changes how you perceive the world, and that changes your response to the pain and hate and darkness in the world. You accept your usefulness to God in bringing the gospel of freedom to others. Accepting God's reliance on each one of us doesn't come easily—not for Isaiah, not for Peter, and not for most of us.

This call from God is also something one lives into. There will be ups and downs, successes and failures. Remember how Peter debated with Jesus about sacrificing himself for God's purposes. Peter couldn't believe that having the power of God on one's side could mean anything but a happy, joy-filled life to the end—certainly not excruciating death on a cross. Jesus had to set Peter straight. And remember, after Jesus' arrest, that Peter denied three times that he knew Jesus. We will all have moments when we deny Jesus' claim upon us. We confess those moments, we receive God's forgiveness, and we set out again to live faithful lives. I believe we all recognize God's need for us, and our need to listen for a word from God. That is why we show up here in church, and showing up is one way of seeking to comprehend and act upon our call from God. And it is not just scripture that guides us. In the midst of this world's darkness, we have each, even for a moment, observed God's light and love in action—perhaps in Dining Room Ministry, or the Food Cupboard, or a RAIHN rotation, to name just three. When we see God's light and love in action and choose to be part of it, we are living into our call from God.

In scripture we are told that God will make up for one's inadequacy and weakness and lack of understanding. You may find yourself up against a closed door or a roadblock, but there is also the expectation that God will show you a way. There will be listening without comprehension but also transformative moments of comprehension. It enabled Isaiah to preach judgment but also the hope of a redeemer. It enabled a demoralized and ashamed Peter to lead the early church after Jesus' death.

My challenge to you and myself is to keep recognizing and living into God's call. We will slip in and out of it, just like Peter, but we keep showing up, repent regularly, and do not lose hope. We listen, and we rejoice in those moments when we comprehend, taking action in large and small ways in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Third Presbyterian Church
4 Meigs Street
Rochester, NY 14607-2013
www.thirdpresbyterian.org

