

### “The Sound of Silence”

During the season after the Epiphany we hear scriptures about other revelations in the Bible. We have heard about the revelation to Jesus of his special status as the beloved Son of God. We heard last week how God revealed the Divine self to Samuel; a mere boy. In Psalm 139 we also heard how God knows and cares for us even as we are knit together in our mother’s womb. We also heard how it was revealed to Philip and Nathanael that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God.

This week we get more revelations. The one that concerns Jonah is wonderfully different. Jonah is commanded by God to travel to the great city of Nineveh. There his task is to warn the people of the city that they need to repent or God will destroy the city. Jonah so hates the people of Nineveh that he goes down to the docks and gets on a boat headed away from Nineveh. God intervenes with a storm that eventually results in Jonah going overboard and being swallowed by a big fish.

While in the belly of the fish Jonah prays for God’s assistance. He promises God that if he gets out of this predicament he would do as God has commanded and preach to the people of Nineveh. The fish takes Jonah to a shore near Nineveh and vomits him onto the beach. Then he makes his way to Nineveh to preach repentance; however, his sermon is short and oblique. “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” It is clear he is still not happy with his task for he does not ask the people to repent. He does not ask them to believe in YHWH. He just says that Nineveh will be overthrown.

Luckily for the people of Nineveh they suss out the meaning of the sermon. They turn from their evil ways. All from the king on down and even the animals wrap themselves in sackcloth and ashes. They fast and kneel in repentance to the God of Israel. The revelation to Jonah and us is the power that God has can effect change in the world even through a reluctant messenger.

We get another revelation of God’s power in the call story of the four fishermen. In this instance Jesus is walking on the shore of the Sea of Galilee when he comes upon two brothers, Simon and Andrew, casting their net into the sea. He says to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people” (or as the King James version writes “I will make you fishers of men.”) They drop everything and follow Jesus.

Moments later Jesus happens upon two more brothers, James and John, fishermen who are repairing their nets after a night of fishing with their father Zebedee. He speaks only two words to them, “Follow me” and they leave their father and their boat and fall in line behind Jesus.

As far as we know Jesus had no contact with these four men prior to this encounter on the seashore. Yet, they leave their families and their livelihood and follow. God’s power is evident in this simple call from Jesus that causes these men to leave their responsibilities and follow a man unknown to them. I wonder what it was in Jesus that made his call so compelling. Was it his voice,

his manner, his attitude, or his countenance that inspires such an immediate and positive response. Or was it just that God is revealed to them in this enigmatic call from Jesus?

Perhaps the answer to this question is revealed in today's psalm which begins "For God alone my soul in silence waits." This message is countercultural and counterintuitive. We are used to having to do things to gain knowledge i.e. study, read and be tested. In the religious arena we also gain knowledge by prayer, worship and contemplation. But the psalmist says to be still. No action is required. Rather, inaction is required. When we can be still then we will know God.

Silencing our soul, heart and mind allows us to be present to God. Jonah could not do it until he was in a big fish. Otherwise, his mind was busy with his prejudices, emotions, and judgements. Even being in a fish's belly for several days did not quell his hatred of the Ninevites, but at least it got him to agree to do God's will.

The fishing brothers were intent on mindless tasks that were part of their fishing day. This allowed them to hear Jesus' call. If they had been in the midst of something that required attention and action they may not have been able to respond as they did.

When we are able to calm our hearts, souls and minds we are able to connect with God more clearly and deeply. When we are busy with tasks, concerns and thoughts God has a hard time breaking through. When we are busy asking for something from God as we often do in our prayers we do not give God the room to get a word in edgewise. There has to be silence and quiet to hear God, just as we need to be quiet to hear another human being. If we treat it like a one-way interaction, we are likely to be disappointed. Even when we are silent we cannot expect a thunderbolt from God every time. Remember that Elijah found God in the still small voice.

May I suggest a simple way to make a place for this stillness. Each time you pray after you share your concerns, desires, and thanks with God instead of rushing to the "Amen" say "Now I will be still and know that you are God." Then be still. Be silent. Calm your mind through attending to your breath. And sit. Do this for a minute and then two minutes and so on. You will find yourself antsy at first, but as you adjust to the silence over time you will find that the minutes slip away. Perhaps you will get a small voice or a thunderbolt or just quiet. But God is in there no matter what. God will be present to you and you will find peace, the peace that passes all understanding. In that peace may be a call to action also. Whatever the silence gives you it will open you more fully to God and only God knows how that may change you and change the world.