

Spiritual Signal Strength

1 Samuel 3:1:10

January 15, 2012

I.

Oh no! Not again! That's what some of you might say if I preached on the Gospels both this week and next. Among other things, today's Gospel from John describes Jesus' calling of his disciples. Next week's Gospel from Mark does the same thing. This week it's about Phillip and Nathanael. Next week it's about Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

And although there are differences between the two stories, the theme in both of them is that Jesus said, "Follow me." And those words suggest how both stories could lend themselves to sermons about responding to God's call to us through Jesus Christ.

So today I would like to do something different. Rather than thinking about how we are doing in fulfilling God's will for us, we might go back a step and ask how we even understand God's will.

Our Old Testament reading about Samuel is a place to start. It leads us first to consider the importance of listening for God's guidance, and from that we then can consider more deeply where we think we are in our spiritual relationships.

II.

And the answers are not the same for all of us. Spiritual journeys are intensely personal experiences. Sometimes we are on the mountain top looking down at all the green fields that stretch beyond, and we feel good about God and life. Other times we struggle through the spiritual wilderness or the dryness of the desert, and wonder where God is.

Some of you might be in each of those places right now. And others could be somewhere in between. And I don't want to seem judgmental, but we have a lot to do with wherever we might happen to be on that spiritual spectrum.

That's because God does not change. Our spirituality might grow or diminish, but it does not mean God has been more or less interested in us. Our spirituality is reflected in our attitudes, not God's. If we sense God's presence more at some times than others, it's not because God has moved closer to us, but rather the other way around.

And there are many ways in which we can move closer to God. We can read daily devotionals, or attend seminars, or participate in spiritual retreats, or seek fulfillment in mission work. Those are good things that add to our spiritual lives.

But they are not the core of our faith in and of themselves. None of those will mean much if God's word through the Bible does not undergird our faith, and if our Lord Jesus Christ is not at the foundation of our lives. Prayer in truth and spirit helps us with both.

III.

So let's look at our Old Testament reading. It is the story of God's call to Samuel to be a prophet, and began when Samuel was a young boy studying and serving in the temple.

One night Samuel was awakened by someone speaking to him. He thought it was Eli, an old priest who also lived in the temple and supervised Samuel's training. So, Samuel went to Eli, but Eli said he had not called. Then the same thing happened a second time, and a third.

On the third occasion Eli realized that the Lord had been calling Samuel and that Samuel had mistaken the voice for Eli's. So Eli told Samuel what to do, and when the Lord called a fourth time, Samuel said, "Speak Lord for your servant is listening" (1 Sa. 3:9-10).

Speak Lord, for your servant is listening. How many times do we say just the opposite? How often do we say "Listen Lord, for your servant is speaking"? How often do we pray in the sending mode rather than the receiving mode?

And there is nothing wrong with the sending mode as part of a larger prayer life. God wants us to come to him in prayer, but he also wants us to listen as he comes to us. And God does not always speak according to our calendars and agendas. God is God, and will speak to us when he is ready, whether we are ready or not.

This is when listening to God can be hard because it means putting aside our own ideas about spirituality or how to relate to God. Nothing will clog up our pipeline to God more quickly than believing we have the answers, or thinking that our way of being spiritual is the right way, or by making choices about faith that seem to be based on validating our own life experiences.

Mark Twain once said he learned much more when he was listening than when he was speaking. That is a lesson we can take from the story of Samuel. But while it is an essential lesson, it is not the only lesson. Both parts of prayer, sending and receiving, define our spirituality.

IV.

With that background, I would like to speak briefly about that barren place I mentioned earlier, that shadowy spiritual desert or wasteland.

And it is important recognize that even though we think we are in a dry place, there are two sides to that coin. Perhaps we actually have moved away from God, but perhaps we have not. Perhaps what we feel is normal. We can doubt when doubt is not warranted. I will cover both.

Let's first consider when we truly are more distant from God. It could be like being too far away from the cell phone tower and the signal is lost and our calls don't go through. Even though our batteries are fine, our spiritual signal strength is weak. How many bars do we have right now? If it's only one or two, we know that the solution is up to us to get closer to the tower.

And that requires some effort. There is no time when we can sit back and say we have prayed enough, or read enough, or worshipped enough. There is no finish line in this life. Just as athletes practice and have a training discipline, we also need a similar discipline in our spiritual lives. It doesn't happen automatically, and we might need to overcome some ingrained routines.

For example, do we start from the same point each time we begin to pray, or do we start from progressively new places as we move more deeply into a loving relationship with God? Do we sort of automatically repeat the same check list of items to God, or does the content of our prayers reflect a transformation occurring in our lives?

And perhaps we might even wonder why prayer is so important. After all, God is everywhere and knows everything. He knows our hearts before we even ask. And God's will is going to be done no matter what we do or say, isn't it? So we simply might not think that prayer is essential.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In the Book of James our Lord's brother proclaimed, "You do not have, because you do not ask" (4:2-3). Later, he said, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (5:16). That idea is throughout the Bible.

This means that our failure to ask can deprive us of what God otherwise might have done for us. I have told the story of the Christian fellow who went to heaven when he died. Part of his

orientation to heaven was to go to a certain very large building. He did so, and joined a line of other people waiting to go in who also were happy about ending up in paradise.

And while waiting in line to go in, he noticed people coming out of another door with sad looks on their faces. When he got into the building he found out why. Once inside, each person was taken into a special room and shown all the blessings that God wanted to give them while they lived on Earth, but that they did not receive because they did not ask.

So, God calls us to listen as Samuel did, but God also wants us to speak, as James proclaimed. And if we think we have moved away from God and want to get closer to the tower again, so to speak, spend some time in prayer both sending and receiving. Your signal strength will improve.

This leads to the other side of the coin I mentioned. At times we might think we are distant from God, but we actually are not. Instead we experience natural phases of spiritual growth where we have reached a temporary plateau, and God simply is calling us to come further.

If we would draw a chart of our spiritual growth, it probably would not be a straight line upwards. Rather, it would look more like stair steps where we feel elation and joy as we attain the next step, only to have it diminish as things level out and we live on that plateau for a while. And because we remember the earlier joy, we might mistakenly believe we are in a spiritual decline.

But that may not be the case. The next step is just ahead. Spiritual journeys are like that. If we think back we might recall that God probably drew us to him in the first place with pleasant experiences. But God also knows that if we insist on always having those pleasant experiences 24/7, if we think it always is about us, then we only serve ourselves or end in idolatry.

And so the evolution away from intimacy with God can be a sign of progress. We move from intimacy to dormancy, from presence to hiatus, from fullness to sparseness, and then we come intimacy again. And if during those times we continue to pray and read and seek the Lord, we will see how, as we know him again, we have grown and been transformed.

V.

Billy Graham once said, "Prayer is the rope that pulls God and people together. But it doesn't pull God down to us; it pulls us up to him."

This means that when we pray from our hearts we can trust God to know what is best for us, even if it is not exactly what we ask. It might be even better in the long run. And if we listen, like Samuel listened in today's reading, we can experience God and we will be changed.

Intentional and thoughtful prayer is part of the continual development of our relationship with God. Reading scripture also is essential. And through them we can more fully know the riches of God's love for us. We can know that God speaks to us, that he hears us, that he loves us, and that he will take care of us. *Amen.*