

Epiphany 5, Year C
February 10, 2019
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Wisdom claims that the best way to convey truth is to tell a story. Stories draw us in, open us up, enable us to relate to others, and help us to see from a new perspective. They are powerful tools of transformation. The Bible is filled with stories precisely because they are an invitation to not only read and listen to the history of God's relationship with other people throughout time, but also because they invite us to become a part of an ongoing story in which **we** come to understand ourselves in relationship with God and with each other.

The Bible readings appointed for today pick up from a series begun last week. The Old Testament lesson last Sunday was from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, and the Revised Standard Version reads:

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth."

I know this reading well, for it was the first lesson read at my ordination as a Deacon over 30 years ago. Back then I was a youth. I chose this reading, as many deacons do, because it spoke the truth of my own

experience of being called by God and responding despite my trepidations. Just over a year later I was ordained a priest and at that service the Old Testament reading was today's passage from Isaiah. Like many priests, I heard the echo of my own sense of call in his words: **"Then I heard the voice of the LORD saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here I am; send me!'"**

Readings like those from Jeremiah and Isaiah, as well as today's lessons from First Corinthians and Luke, are known as call narratives, for they tell the story of a person or a group of people being called by God and their response to that call. Call narratives vary widely. Moses and Jeremiah were reluctant responders; both demonstrated hesitation to accept God's call and cited their inability to speak well. Paul had a dramatic call despite his dedication to persecuting the early Church, therefore describing himself as **"unfit to be called an apostle."** Luke tells of Jesus' call of Simon Peter, James and John, which is at best somewhat odd to those of us who are not fisher folk. Their story is certainly entertaining, but how many of you would walk away from your present life based on an abundant catch of fish? Clearly they were convinced that they should follow Jesus. What would it take to persuade *you* to leave your life to follow Jesus into the unknown?

One of the most important factors in a call story is what we describe as discernment. Discernment is the term we use for figuring out whether or not something is of God. My colleague Elizabeth put it well when she asks, **“Is it me or is it God?”** Not every invitation is holy. Not every longing is based in the Holy Spirit. Not every possibility is set before us by God. So how do we know, especially when the path presented to us is fraught with risk, as it was for Moses and Jeremiah; or is impressive and dramatic, as it was for Isaiah and Paul; or is highly unusual but perhaps not at all ‘religious,’ as with Simon Peter, James and John?

Discernment begins with storytelling. As Episcopalians many of us have not had a lot of practice at either telling our faith stories or listening to those of other people. At Christ Church we have begun to practice storytelling. Many among you bravely shared your experiences of the Holy in the *Finding God In* services that were part of my doctoral project; some have told of their own moments of insight and challenge in *Conversations*, particularly in the Welcoming Workshops; and Vestry members and their conversation partners both told and listened to another’s spiritual story as part of The Learning Communities Initiative. The Bishop has begun a Visioning process in the Diocese of Central New

York in which one of the first steps is for us to partner with another person on the Visioning Team to both tell and listen to a story of our experience of the Presence of God. This practice of storytelling helps us better understand that discerning a sense of God's Presence and call is not just something that happens in the Bible. It is an essential part of what we are called to do in Christian community.

Discernment is not a 'one and done' exercise. When Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Paul, Simon Peter, James, and John all accepted that they were indeed encountering the Presence of God, and were called to either do as God said or follow where Jesus led, that was the *beginning* of a whole new life, both for them and for those of us who have come after them. Sharing our stories in the context of a respectful and prayerful Christian community is a powerful way to give our attention to how God might be at work both in and through us. Storytelling and listening can help us figure out whether our unusual experience or sense of call is affirmed by others, and whether it is something we should respond to or follow. Ongoing discernment can be as ordinary and obvious as figuring out where we might go to college or get a job, whom we might marry, whether we should move, or if it is time to have a baby or retire. It could also be as surprising and unexpected as a

career change, a call to ordained or specialized lay ministry, a new way to use a gift, or a call to prophetic work for the good of God's people.

The tradition of call narratives in the Bible teaches us that God is present, and that we as God's people are tasked with cultivating our capacity to pay attention, to heed God's call and our responses, and to encourage others along the way by listening to and discerning with them. Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning highlights the possibilities that arise when we learn to pay attention:

**Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware.**

Amen