

Sermon Jan 28, 2018
Deut 18, 1Corinthians 8, Mark 1

I almost never do this, but today I want to look at all three readings. This isn't exactly a sermon, (by that I mean an exposition and exploration of a text,) but rather a question, and then a look at the three readings in the light of that question. Does that make any sense?

So first, the question. We talked about this some last week when we considered the stories of Jonah, and the call of the first four disciples, according to Mark. I asked you then about the whole concept... of call...What does that mean?

We read that God *called* Jonah to go to Ninevah. Jesus *called* the fishers. I asked you what your own experience of call is....

And how do you know when a call...when a voice...when a sense of being led...when that's truly from God. How do you know?

Some people have clear calls: a voice, a dream, a feeling so strong that there is no question about it. Or its origin.

But most of us live in the world ofmore uncertainty than that. We get a feeling, a nudge. An itchy conscience. A sense that we ought to be doing a particular thing...and we wonder. IS this what I'm being asked to do? And how do I know, for sure? Is the voice I hear (however I hear it) is that the voice of God, or is it just my own wishful thinking?

Last week I used a silly example: I said that sometimes in the middle of January, I think I hear the voice of God calling me to be chaplain on a cruise ship. But there are variations on that kind of thing that aren't so silly....so I ask myself, how DO I know when my inner sense of what I should do is self serving, and when it's really the Holy One? And are those necessarily opposite things?

These questions are very real...and manifest themselves at different times in our lives. When you're young, questions of vocation. What will I do with my life, what job or career. Then increasingly that question comes again mid life. So many people switching careers mid life. Where to live? Do you pack up everything and head for the Yukon, or...somewhere else, and is there a call from God in that? If you have a choice, how is that choice made? For me now, questions about retirement. That's coming soon but when? And how will I know it's the right time? And what to do after that? Am I being led by God and how will I know? Some of you who are already retired, you have chosen to spend your time now doing other things....is there a sense of God's call in that? Or...in an age of complicated political discussions and when decisions have to be made about public policy especially about things we've never had to consider before....how do you decide what's right, and are we being called as a society in a certain direction and....

I'm just saying what we already know. This question isn't just an academic exercise.

The three readings today make a contribution to that discussion. So let's just dive in.

The first, from the book of Deuteronomy....a reading that I find helpful more for its question than the answer it offers.

Deuteronomy 18:15-22

Can I just give you some background on that reading and on the book itself? Deuteronomy literally means “second law” and it is essentially a book written to reinterpret the law, the stories, the tradition of Israel, for a new time and a new situation. The author takes the old stories from Exodus for example, rewrites them and reinterprets them as he or she believes God is speaking to the people years after they were originally written. Within the Bible itself there is the expectation that

- 1) God WILL continue to speak in new ways for new situations
- 2) the people will keep hearing that word and there will be among them people, prophets, who listen for God's word now. That is, there's no going back to say "It's written right here so that's how it is" That's not the Biblical way

So...the book of Deuteronomy in itself is an exercise in listening to the voice of God in a new time. Beneath that as I said, is the absolute belief that God can and does speak into new times and new situations. God is always taking this basic love story, the foundational tradition, and breathing into it new life and new insights. The people of God are used to this; it's our heritage. What new word is God speaking now, we ask ourselves again and again and again.

Specifically here, the question is about leadership. They're afraid because they want a strong leader like they used to have. Who will lead them and how will they know if their leader is speaking the word of God, how will they tell if the prophet among them is leading them in the right way?

As I said, I like the question more than the answer. But listen to the answer again....VS 21ff

If it proves true, the text says. If the words prove true.

We talked about this at Bible study last Wednesday. The plain meaning of this is thatyou don't know until later. You look back and see, yes this was God's leading, or no it was not.

Has that happened to you? That's certainly been true in my life. I very rarely get a lightning bolt or a crystal clear sense of God's will for me. Most often take one step at a time, trying to stay open, trying to follow in the right way....

And then later I can look back and say

Yes, I listened well

Or

No, that was wrong.

Did the thing prove true. Did it turn out to be consistent with what you know and understand to be the good news of God

Let's turn to the gospel reading now:

Mk 1: 21-28

So...whatever voices are speaking, the voice of Jesus is more powerful. This may not seem like an important principle for you right now but I can tell you this: you may not have the experience of being possessed by a demon or feeling that you are...you may not have ever felt that there are voices and forces that are trying to destroy you.....but there are people who do feel that. And there are times when for all of us, the voices may not manifest like this, but they are strong and they speak to destroy you.

They say

You're no good you're a fraud; if people really knew you what would they think?

Everyone is out to get you, nobody really cares. Life is just a big game it doesn't mean anything

They fill you with fear they make you give your life over to things that destroy you, eat away at your

soul: fear, or hate or greed or revenge; things that poison you. Substances that control you
Those voices are real and they are powerful

And listen to me now:

The voice of Jesus is more powerful. The voice of Jesus is stronger than that. And if a voice is telling you to hurt or hate yourself, to hurt or hate someone else

Then that voice has nothing to do with God

And the voice of Jesus rings out strong and true against it. The voice of Jesus is by your side. Loves you. Wants your health and wholeness. And wants the same for everyone else in the whole world: the people the animals the trees and the water. The voice of Jesus calls for health and wholeness for the whole creation.

The voice of Jesus is stronger and more powerful and more enduring and life-giving than anything in all creation.

Finally let's go to 1 Corinthians, but some background first

This letter is written by Paul to the church in Corinth. A little about Corinth. It is a huge city. A port city. Like New York. Part of what that means is that there are people from EVERYWHERE there. All languages, colours, religions...all mixing together in the way that they do in cities like that. Not always friendly toward one another but people were certainly aware that there were lots of religions. So when Paul came along preaching the gospel of Jesus, the church was one among many faiths.

What all that meant for the early church though, was kind of complicated. First of all, one of the signature signs of the Jesus family is that they ate together. The earliest worship services wereessentially potlucks. Great, right?

Yes – and no.

Yes because...in that culture, to eat with someone is a sign of complete acceptance. THAT, as I understand it, was not common at all and was considered quite revolutionary.

Remember how Jesus got into trouble – they said....that guy will eat with anybody! That was one of the charges against him. He'd eat with anybody. And his community continued in that way. The circle was drawn wide, wide.

But it got complicated. Christians who had been Jews first had food laws. And some still followed them. So if you practice Jewish food laws, and you're a follower of Jesus now, and you go to worship, take your casserole or whatever, and someone else brings their grandmother's pork chop dish....what do you do? So that was one thing, but then

More and more people from other religions altogether began to join the family. What WAS that stuff they were bringing? And where did they get that meat?

Because when you went to the market to get meat, you couldn't be sure where it came from...maybe it has come from an animal that's been offered to another god. And if it has...do we eat it, or not?

The bible says not to worship any other God that's commandment #1. No other gods before me.

Is it worshipping another god if we eat meat that has been offered to one?

So that's the presenting question.

Paul, as I read this, takes it away from that question and to a general principle that helps our own original question. See what you think.

1 Corinthian 8

Can we eat meat that's been offered to an idol?
This is partly how Paul responds.

For starters, we know there is no god but one – only God is God, there ARE no others.
So...

If meat has been offered to another god, that god doesn't really exist so you're eating meat that's been offered to nothing so....what's your problem??

But, he says, YOU know that and I know that....WE have that knowledge...

But not everyone does. Not everyone is there. Some people are really bothered by that, and honestly feel that they are worshipping an idol by eating that meat. You might call that weakness. You might say they haven't thought it out enough, they don't have the same knowledge as you do

Maybe that's true.

But they are your sisters and brothers and so now the question is not about meat or no meat
The question is
How are you going to treat your sisters and brothers in Christ?

Of course you are free to follow your own conscience and eat it
But why would you if it's going to hurt someone else?

That's not in the spirit of love. It's not in the spirit of Jesus; of taking care of one another.
It's like

Drinking in front of someone who is trying to stay away from alcohol. Of course you're free to do that but why would you, if it's going to hurt or tempt that person? It just seems....I don't know...mean.

Does this make sense?

I like the line early in the text...

Knowledge puffs up

But love builds up.

Three contributions to our continuing exploration of how to understand and respond to God's call.
From Deuteronomy – the promise that there WILL be voices among us speaking God's word in our present situation whatever it is. . And sometimes we know it in hindsight. If it proves true.

From Mark, a strong witness that the voice of Jesus is one that wants health and life for us. The voice of Jesus speaks against voices that harm us or others, that counsel hate and harm. AND the voice of Jesus in the end is stronger than any voice that seeks to destroy.

Finally from Paul a word calling us to ask

Does this build up the community? Does it care for those who may be weak? Does it fixate on some principle or does it make room for many at the table?

May we continue to be open to the call of God in all its mystery and variety
And may God bless you as you think about these things.