

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

A sermon by Reverend Alice Marcrum
2nd Sunday after Epiphany, 2006

One of the questions that are often asked of me is, “How did God call you into the ministry?”. Now of course there is the long version and then there is the short version. Depending on who is asking and the time I have to reply determines which version is told. Today I want to share with you the longer version, especially since some of you already got a snippet of it through the local newspaper.

For those of you who are not use to hearing the preacher share his or her life at the pulpit, I stand on the verse in Revelation which states, ***“They have conquered him by the Blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.”*** The ‘him’ who has been conquered is the Devil. To paraphrase it, ‘The saints, those who have been baptized into Christ, have conquered the Devil by the Blood of the Lamb, who is Jesus the Christ, and by sharing how God through Christ has changed their lives.’

The enemy of Christ hates it when Christians encourage one another with their testimonies of what Christ has done for them. This animosity toward believers in Christ is because when actual witness of Christ’s transforming power is shared with others, then the Spirit of God can use that witness to transform others. The Bible is full of stories and testimonies of God’s divine intervention into the lives of ordinary people. In today’s readings we were given the testimony of the prophet Samuel and the Apostle Nathaniel. These are only samples of God’s mighty power to change lives. God is still in the business of changing lives today. This is why it is so important that we allow ourselves to be used by God to let others know what wondrous things He has done in our lives. Perhaps God will use our testimony to touch someone else for Christ. This is my prayer that the Spirit of God will continue to change our lives in accordance to His will for us.

Now to continue with my testimony, the call first came to me at a Baptist summer camp. Unlike the boy Samuel, who heard the Lord speak out loud, the voice I heard was a soft voice from inside of me. It was the voice of the Spirit speaking to my spirit.

Some of you here may have experienced a similar form of communication from God, the voice that tells you right from wrong or leads you to follow one path in life and to shun another. Our culture has called it the voice of conscience. In cartoons, it has been portrayed as an angel sitting on one shoulder, while a devil holding a pitchfork sits on the other shoulder. Mind you, these are rather old cartoons, because in today’s world the voice of conscience is rarely mentioned or honored as it was in the past. When a person in a public position actually let it be known that he or she listens to an inner voice for spiritual direction; this

admittance often becomes a point of ridicule from the media and other sources in our secular society.

So if you are sitting here today and are fearful of revealing this communication that takes place between you and God, then I understand. What I have found to be sad is that because we as a culture no longer are encouraged to seek the Lord; those who do so do at their own risk. The inheritance of a nation in spiritual bankruptcy that we are leaving our children and grandchildren is a most frightening legacy for the future of our nation and the world.

As parents and grandparents we need to encourage our children and grandchildren to always be ready to listen to the voice of the Lord. As Eli instructed Samuel, we need to teach them to be attentive to the voice of the Lord and to respond with the words of Eli, ***“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”***

At the age of ten, when I heard the Lord speaking to me to follow Him into ministry, I went forward and made a public declaration about it. The Lord had called me to “preach the gospel” and I said, “Yes” to Him. For five years, I told people that I was going to be a foreign missionary and preach the good news about Jesus. Since I had not seen any female Baptist preachers in America, but several female foreign missionaries, I believed that was the course I must take to follow the Lord’s bidding.

At the age of fifteen, I was told that what I had heard from the Lord could not be true, because only men were allowed to preach and pastor churches. I was informed by those who supposedly knew better than I, that the voice I heard was not calling me to preach, but perhaps to serve as a Youth Pastor or to become involved in leadership for Sunday School. Yet, even at fifteen, I knew that it was the Lord who had spoken to me. What surprised me was that the elders of the church had not heard the same voice that I had heard.

So I went back into my prayer closet and told the Lord that I had said yes, but the church had said no. At this point in my life, I took the dream of ministry that the Lord had given to me and very gently tucked it away. It was not an easy time in my life to watch a dream die, but for me that is what happened.

Much to my surprise, twenty years later, the Lord started speaking to me through other people about His calling on my life to preach the gospel. Within a six month span, exactly three people, who did not know about the calling I had received in my childhood, were used by the Lord to remind me. The calling that I thought had died at fifteen when the church had said no was still there. In fact, the Lord had a priest ask me, ***“When are you going to get ordained?”***

There are some here today, who have had to say good-bye to dreams of ministry or have been forced to table them while life’s circumstances led them in

other directions. The Lord wants you to know that He is still there with you. Those dreams were given to you by Him and the calling is still there. It is not too late.

Now you would think that being told that “the calling was still there” would have thrilled my soul, but it didn’t. During those twenty years of not hearing from the Lord about being called into ordained ministry, I had led a full life. I had married and helped to raise my husband’s two children from his first marriage. My husband and I had a child of our own and I was busy taking care of her. I was also serving as a member of the vestry, as an officer in an ecumenical women’s ministry and being an executive’s wife. As the saying goes, “My plate was full”. Of all the times in my life to go through discernment and go back to school, this was not it!

Unlike the two examples we were given in today’s lessons of positive responses to the Lord, I was more like a Jonah. I was angry at the Lord’s timing. My life was a lot more open to change at fifteen rather than in my middle thirties. But the Lord had other plans and try as I may; I could only fight against the Lord for so long until I was on my knees, alone, in front of the altar of an Episcopal Church giving the Lord complete control of my life.

There may be some here today, who are not willing to let the Lord have complete control over your lives. Perhaps there are areas that are marked as *personal* and not to be touched and changed by the presence of Christ. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he reminds the believers that our bodies are Temples of the Holy Spirit. We are here to serve and to be obedient to the Lord.

Whenever we stray from the Lord’s will in our lives, we are missing out on knowing the fullness of Christ. God is a personal God. He wants to have a personal relationship with each and every one of us. When sin comes into our lives through our actions by thought, word, or deed, then that relationship is weakened. It is weakened because sin keeps us from living in God’s will for us.

Sin comes to us in many different forms. We cannot say that we are ignorant of what sin is, because the scriptures plainly teach us the difference of good and evil. One of my sins was when I was angry at God’s timing and fought against Him for six months by refusing to submit to His will for my life.

As someone who has struggled against the will of God, I can personally testify to you that it is not worth it. In the end, God wins. Whether it is in this life or the next, we all have to eventually come before Him on our knees and submit to His will. May I suggest that it is better to submit to Him in this life, than before the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Today, I testify before you that Jesus is worth following. He will never forsake us nor leave us. The dreams that He has given to us are there for the fulfilling. Only

when we are living for Christ can we know the fullness of our salvation. To receive this fullness, all we have to do is listen for His voice and obey Him. Then we can rejoice with the psalmist who proclaimed, ***“So will I bless you as long as I live and lift up my hands in your Name.”***