

Year B, Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 24, 2021
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“And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sack cloth.”

There is a lightness in the air, isn't there? A wholesomeness and sense of decorum, a level of respect for the way things are properly done in government is returning. After the chaos of the past four years, the tragedy in leadership since the pandemic began, all of it culminating in the violence at the capitol on the 6th, a return to decent normality, as imperfect as it is, has been desperately needed. Some folks aren't pleased with the policy changes that are underway, but I hope that good people of conscience will recognize that the tone of leadership, that actually leading, especially in a time of crisis, is as important as any policies that are adopted; maybe more so. God Bless America and all the whole world with us.

What is God's will, for us, right now? For us, as a church community, as citizens of this land, as human beings in a challenging chapter in history, what does God need of us? Not our ideas, not our will, or the will of our leaders, as reasonable as ours or theirs might seem, but what is God's will? That is what is going to save us, following, submitting even, to the will of God. Last week we talked about the need to submit to the will of God. This is part two in a three part series. Today we will address how we know the will of God.

The will of God. Knowing the will of God... There are lots of voices out there claiming divine authority. The church and/or her leaders. Political prophets. Sages in the academy. The good news/bad news world of cultural *influencers*. Prescient algorithms that can seem to know us better than ourselves. Friends, spouses, that brother-in-law... everyone's got one, someone or something that *knows*. And there are plenty of voices in here, in our heads and hearts and guts, too; feelings, ideas, reasoning, all these voices claiming to be good, beautiful and true (all ways of saying of God)... and some of them are. And some of them are not.

How did Nineveh know it was God's will that Jonah proclaimed as he traversed the city, and not some street corner wacko claiming that the end of the world was near? How did Simon and Andrew, James and John the sons of Zebedee, how did they know to drop their nets and follow God in Christ and with Mark's immediacy? How did they know it was God's will?

For me, the biggest source of hope that I have, the reason I can honestly preach the Good News of Jesus Christ and embrace fully true Christian hope is that almost all of us have the capacity

to hear God's voice, to discern God's will, on our own. We have free will, meaning we always have a choice in what we do or do not do. And with that grave responsibility, God has gifted us with the capacity to know right from wrong. (The right, obviously, being the will of God). Far too often we make wrong choices, be it out of ignorance, willful disregard, or handing over power to others to make decisions for us, but that capacity is there, you know (or can know) God's will, and that is very good news indeed.

How? It is right there lodged in the back of your mind, in the bottom of your heart, right in your gut. Your conscience. That niggling little voice (oh this is a bad idea), that angel/devil pair on your shoulders (Do it! Don't Do it! – that is straight out of Plato). You know right from wrong. Full Stop. (Isn't that what people say now)? There is often a lot of nuance: short term harm v. long term good, tough love v. immediate kindness, lots of calls to contemplate, to consider different angles, different perspectives on any given issue or moment. We have an innate sense of God's will, if we listen. (We'll get to how in a bit).

Another source of God's will, here typified by Jonah's heralding cries in Nineveh, is the voice of others. I was at a pre-ordination event years ago, and a skit was put on about how to know if you are being called into ordained ministry. The scene was coffee hour after church, and a young man, Ranjit (he was a priest in the diocese) was talking and someone asked, "Have you ever considered becoming a priest?" He answered, "No, I haven't been called." The action stopped, someone held up a sign, "Ranjit, this is God calling you!" It happens a couple of times, "Ranjit, this is God calling you!" How often does that happen, right? All the time.

Someone saying "I need help," can be a definitive call of God. So can, "That's a bad idea." from someone trusted. And people we don't know first hand speak to us all the time. Reading, be it a novel, an op-ed, a book of moral theology, or your Bible, heaven forbid. Hearing a sermon, listening to music, encountering art in any form... in any way other human beings communicate with us, the word (and will) of God can be transmitted. We don't have the benefit of Jesus Himself calling us like he did those fishermen, but the world is rife with carriers of the word of God, if we listen.

But listening for it, in our inner dialogue or from those around us, that is a skill that needs to be learned and practiced. One thing the Trump era of "alternative facts" has laid bare is that distinct and conflicting notions of not only meaning but facts themselves are far too often present. How can we tell if what we hear/see/know is actually True, actually of God?

They say that every preacher has one actual sermon in them. Mine, from my first days of preaching has always been *Pay Attention*. We have keen senses, inward and outward, we can perceive a lot. At the same time, to an almost miraculous extent, we can ignore what we perceive to be true. We can ignore, say, massive character flaws, horrendous, abusive behavior, our own self-interests for a lifetime. Now, if we couldn't overlook the failings of others we couldn't be in relationship with anyone, so being able to ignore some things is necessary, but we take it to extreme levels with our intimate partners, children, other family members, friends and colleagues, and, as of late, too many political leaders. So what we need to do is pay attention. But how?

I've been part of an Ignatian retreat since October. Ignatian spirituality is the school of Christian thought and practice given by St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits. His whole thing is discerning what is of God. Through reading scripture, through lots of visualization and imagining conversations with God, imagining what things look like from God's perspective, St. Ignatius has taught how to hear God's voice for hundreds of years. The primary tool he gave us is a daily practice of paying attention to ourselves, to the world around us, and to how we react to all of it. It is called the Examen.

The Examen is a daily prayer exercise of 20 minutes or so (some do it twice, but once in the evening is what we are being taught). There are many forms of the Examen, the heart of the matter is reflecting on where God was in your life, today. It is generally a series of questions like "What am I thankful for today?" "When did I feel close to God today?" "When did I most live in the moment today?" "When did I give love?" "When did I receive love?" "What do I need for tomorrow?" "How could I have been better?" Pretty basic stuff.

However, as with most religious practices, pretty basic stuff, done *religiously*, over weeks and months and years, can cause profound changes in our lives. The Examen changes us in that it puts us in habits of paying attention to how we are in the world. Our awareness of ourselves and how we relate and react to the world sharpens our senses, opens our hearts, and we become attuned to the subtleties of existence, attuned to the still small voices of your mother, that 3rd grade teacher who was so right, to the mentors and guides you had throughout, or any other mouthpiece of God in your life. I encourage you to look up Examen on line and test the waters. Or join us in our Lenten Wednesday Seekers in which we will explore a variety of Spiritual Practices, including this one.

Another practice that tunes our hearts and minds to the will of God is the practice of contemplative prayer. Silent prayer. Meditation. I am just learning the practice of the Examen; I've been meditating for 20 years, and all I can say is that it works. There are many forms, but the basic

premise is that God is constantly present, God is constantly seeking and speaking to us, but in sighs too deep for words. Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating and other Trappists are our guides here, having revived practices of the 3rd century Desert Mothers and Fathers, and the *Cloud of Unknowing*, a key work on silence by an anonymous English monk of the 14th century. “For God alone my soul in silence waits,” prays the Psalmist.

The key of the contemplative practices is to still the voice(s) in your head, calm the torrent of activity that drowns out all but the loudest stimuli. God speaks God’s will to us always, but with the volume of things, it is very hard to hear.

Centering Prayer is the most basic practice. You sit in silence and allow the silence to be. Which is hard. Very hard. Exhaustingly hard sometimes, but cosmically satisfying when you are there. The words “Silence is the language of God” were painted on the wall of the monastery I made my Lenten retreats the past few years. So was “Silence is a deep as eternity.” Once we are back to being together one of my first projects is to get Centering Prayer going at St. Francis. When we reach levels of silence, where the distractions of the world are removed, if only for a moment, God’s will can become very clear.

But silence isn’t restricted to a prayer cushion or straight back chair in front of the altar. My first experience of silence, true contemplative silence was distance running. Everything quieted down. Clarity was possible. I’ll bet sailing gives many opportunities for silence. According to Norman McLean, the prophet of Missoula, fly fishing is the highest form of prayer. Sure. The Rosary works, too. All sorts of music can get you there. (Silence is existential, not necessarily auditory). Visual and performing art forms, writing, creativity. Driving. Whatever works.

My second experience of silence after running was making hay. Driving a tedder or a side delivery rake around a field 100 times... you have to pay attention, you can’t just drift off to a distant beach or plans for next week, but you have to stay mindful, silent in its way...

But all sorts of things come out in silence. A meditation teacher I have read talks about the meetings, courtships, marriages and divorces that happen between meditators on retreat who have never spoken, it all in their minds over the course of a silent week. You hear something, how do you know if it is of God?

As Christians, Anglican Christians at that, the great Three-Legged stool of Richard Hooker can be an indicator of godliness. Does whatever you are considering jive with scripture? That is not the end all, slavery and homophobia, the inferiority of women and retributive violence and things like that are all over scripture, but the will of God is also found. Tradition is another test. Have we

done it this way before? What are arguments for and against, and by whom and to what end? And of course most Episcopalian's favorite, reason. Does it make sense? Does it seem right?

So in analyzing a choice, using the three legged stool, ask Does x, show loving kindness to widows, orphans, aliens? Is it good news for the poor? Does it proclaim release to the captives? Liberation to the oppressed? The years of the Lord's favor? Does it reflect God's preferential option for the poor? Who is first and who is last?

Another test come from Ignatius. He teaches considering the object of contemplation; a decision, a lesson, a direction. Hold it in your mind. Does holding it compare to the sensation of a drop of water falling on a sponge, or moss, something soft. Does it soak in, absorb gently, quietly? Or is it a splat on stone or concrete? Jarring, sharp. The psychological notions of warm fuzzies and cold pricklies is very similar. How does X make you feel, like physically?

Applying the precautionary principal of the ecological movement is another good test of something being God's will. One way to formulate this notion is "Indication of harm, not proof of harm is reason for action." (There used to be a huge mural on the side of the movie theater in Harvard Square with that caption). This is Rachel Carson stuff. You shouldn't have to prove that DDT is bad, manufacturers should have to be prove it safe before it is used. The road to hell is paved with good intentions... the unintended consequences of action or inaction can be legion, beware! (So take the time to think it all through).

And then there are some real basic tests, just discernment questions to ask. Who does this truth/choice benefit? Is it pleasing to your best parts? Does it appeal to the better angles of your nature? (Finding something pleasing to your less than best parts is a pretty good indicator, too). Would you want this choice/what you see as the will of God on the cover of the paper? Would you repeat it at Church? Would you want your mom, spouse, best friend, child neighbor, priest to know about it? Why or why not?

These are tools, practices, some formal, some ad hoc, but all designed to cut through the chatter of our daily existence, all the preconceived notions and prejudices we all hold, and get down to the business of God, of God's will and making God's will real on earth. How? Well, that's next week. AMEN.