

Who remembers a time before voicemail and answering machines? If you called someone and they weren't home, the phone just rang and rang and you'd have to hang up and try again later. Those of you born after 1990 may have no first had experience of hearing the phone ring in a different room in the house and running to pick it up before the person calling gave up. Not only that, but you had no idea who was calling until you actually picked up the phone. There was no caller ID to tell you if the person on the other end was your best friend, or someone trying to sell something. There was also no call waiting so if you were on the phone with your cousin David and your friend Carey called, they would get a busy signal and they'd have to try calling back later. I think I am the last generation who has memories of those times. I am too young to remember party lines or phone numbers that included letters in them, but I remember when phones had dials instead of buttons.

The advancements in our telephones has changed the way we communicate. With cell phones and caller ID, we usually know who is calling. Since we have voicemail, we can decide whether or not to answer the call or have the caller leave a message. With texting and social media platforms, lots of conversations happen without either party even making a call.

What if your phone rang one day and the caller ID said "God"? What would you do? Would you pick it up immediately? Would you ponder for a few seconds about why God might be calling you or wonder if she possibly got the wrong number. Or would you let that call go to voicemail?

Every pastor I know has a "call story." These are the stories of how they decided to become pastors. The language of being called is pretty common among clergy and there is an unwritten expectation that those of us who serve the church heard a call from God and responded by saying Yes! I've heard lots of call stories from friends and colleagues and no two stories are the same. Some of them include visions and impassioned prayers that are answered with an almost audible voice, while others are more simple stories of feeling nudged or encouraged down the path of ministry. This morning we get to hear Abram's call story. But Abram's is isn't just any old call story. It is the first call story and the foundational story of three major world religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Last week we heard the story of Noah and the flood. This week, ten generations later, we meet Abram, a descendant of Noah's son Shem. FYI - Later in the story God changes Abram's name to Abraham and his wife Sarai to Sarah. Name changes happen frequently in scripture as a way of signifying a transformation and a new

relationship with God. As was the custom in those days, Abram lived in his father's house with his wife and other family. They lived in a place called Haran which is in modern day Turkey. Abram was married to Sarai and they had been unable to have children and now they were old enough that having children was likely impossible. This is pretty much all we know about Abram. He is not described as a man of deep faith in God, or someone who was righteous. The scripture does not give us any clues as to why God calls on Abram to go to Canaan. Maybe God knew that Abram would be likely to say yes. Maybe God had called lots of other people and Abram was the only one who picked up the phone.

Abram's decision to answer this call from God is huge. When Abram leaves "his country and his kindred and his father's house," he gives up every social structure that would be able to support him when times get bad. He moves hundreds of miles away from his family, and his community. And he doesn't even know where God is leading him. God simply says go to the land that I will show you. When Abram leaves Haran with his wife, his nephew, and as the scripture puts it "the persons whom they had acquired" he did not know where God was leading him.

While this story of Abram's call is a foundational one for all three of the Abrahamic faiths, I think it contributes to a misunderstanding of how God calls us. Most of my life when I heard people say God spoke to them or God called them, I thought one of two things. I either thought they were delusional, or I felt envious that God actually talked to them. Sometimes I felt both of these things at the same time. I used to think God didn't talk to me because I was expecting something big and undeniable like an audible voice, and that frankly seemed a little ridiculous. But what I have learned is that God calls us in more subtle ways and that we have to slow down and pay attention if we expect to hear the phone ringing.

I think this is a common misunderstanding of how God speaks to us. We read stories in the bible about God "appearing" to people, or "speaking" to people and we wonder why that doesn't happen for us. We think that maybe God doesn't exist. Or maybe people who say God speaks to them are either lying or deluding themselves. Or maybe we think that God doesn't think we are worthy of God's attention. But the truth is, we don't really know how people like Abram experienced calls from God. I think it is very possible that what gets described in scripture as "God speaking" may not have been a clear and audible voice, but rather an internal urge or nudge that felt grounded in something beyond themselves.

I remember first recognizing a holy nudge during prayer time at my home church in Woodinville, Washington. During prayers of the people, they don't pass a microphone around like we do here, but they do speak prayers aloud. When I first started attending the church about ten years ago, I would think about a prayer concern that I wanted lift up but became nervous about speaking it out loud. Especially if the prayer was about something I was personally struggling with. I worried that I wouldn't know what to say or that my words wouldn't be pious enough and that I would embarrass myself. I know, I've changed a lot since then! But one Sunday morning I was sitting in silence as we began our prayer time, and I felt a strong urge to share my prayer concern. I don't remember now what the prayer was, but I remember feeling like there was something pushing me to speak up. The longer I sat in silence, the more urgent the prayer felt. I realized that if I let the moment pass, I would regret it. So I spoke up, said my prayer, and then returned to silence feeling a little shaky but also relieved that I followed through.

This may seem like a small thing, but I began to recognize that feeling as a nudge from God. An invitation from the Holy to do something beyond my comfort zone. I started to pay attention more and more to that feeling beyond prayer time in church. I spent more time in prayer and asked God to help me become aware of when God was trying to tell me something, and the courage to actually say yes. Whether it was an answered prayer or if the mere act of praying this request shifted my focus, I began to be more aware of occasions in my life when I felt invited or nudged to live in ways that followed the teachings of Jesus, but were scary or uncomfortable. Things like tutoring a woman who in the midst of being without a house, decided to go back to school and study religion. Or having a conversation with a person living on the street about their passion for playing chess. Or noticing when people could use a helping a hand and not hesitating to offer mine.

One day about a year ago I was stopped at the intersection by the mall. A truck in front of me had about 10 pieces of drywall in the bed and when the light turned green, he accelerated and all of the boards slid out of the pickup truck and onto the road. He stopped his truck in the intersection and got out and started to pick up the large and heavy boards and try to put them in the truck by himself. Other drivers continued to drive around him but no one got out to help. I only hesitated for a few seconds and I felt that nudge again so I put my car in park and helped the guy put all the boards back in his truck. Is this the equivalent of packing up all of my belongings and my spouse and moving to a new country where I don't know anyone because God asked me to? Certainly not. But I think it is an example to the way God speaks to us in daily life. Our job is two-fold: to quiet ourselves and our lives long enough and with intention so we

have the ability to hear God or feel the movement of the holy spirit stirring within us. And then, to trust that voice when we hear it, and say yes.

This is true for us as individuals and as a church community. This is important for every day events like helping someone at school who dropped all the papers in the middle of the hallway, and for big life changing events like starting a new career, starting a family, discerning our call in life after retirement and in our senior years. Don't forget Abram was not a young man. God calls on all of us in different ways regardless of age.

So, my invitation to you this week is to spend some time with God. Find some quiet and just ask God to bring your awareness to the ways in which God might be calling you in big ways, in small ways, in every moment, and in big once in a lifetime moments. Listen for the ways in which God might be calling you. And may you have the courage to answer.