

“Listening To God’s Voice”

Dear friends, greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

There are times, in almost any person’s life, where things happen (in such a way) that if they are (paying attention) to what’s happening, it starts feeling like God is trying to get their attention. And it doesn’t matter who they are. Followers of Jesus (or not), there’s no one in this world who is not loved eternally by God and who is (somehow) outside of his desire to have them as his children. As a result, there’s no one in this world to whom God has not tried, in a variety of ways (over the course of a lifetime) to speak.

As a pastor, I’ve heard countless stories of how God has worked to influence and direct (and speak into) the situations and circumstances people have faced. And, not surprisingly, (at the time) when it’s happening, as they were (going through it), and listening for it, (in most cases) it wasn’t always easy to tell what God was trying to tell them. Only in retrospect (and by faith), did it ever become clear.

The same is true in my own life. I could give a long list of times and places and situations where I was convinced that God was trying to tell me something. Some of them big, some small, some of them actual rather simply and mundane, but ones (in which) and to which I heard God’s voice. And when I say that, (that I heard God’s voice), what I mean is, that I sensed he was speaking (wanting me to listen) without actually (and audibly) hearing the voice of God.

How does God speak to us in our (life together) as a congregation? How does God speak to you in your (own life) individually as a follower Christ? And how do we know when it’s God’s voice and not something else? How can we be sure that what we’re hearing is actually a message that comes from him? And what about those times when we don’t know? And what about those situations when his voice seems to be silent? And what about all of the (what abouts), and whens and wheres we face each day?

Over the next six weeks, we’re going to be looking at a number of passages that will help us think through (and consider) how it is God actually speaks. We’re calling it our Kairos Series. It’s a series in which we are looking for those Kairos moments when we believe God is trying to get our attention and tell us something.

In the Bible, the word “Kairos” is a word used to describe time; in particular, certain moments in time when something is happening that God wants us to hear. Kairos moments are (often times) special moments, significant moments, moments (in time) in which we need to (sit up) and pay attention to what’s happening.

In the Bible, when a Kairos moment happens, something’s happening that needs a response. And it’s in that response to whatever it is that’s happening (and God is saying) that we take (or not take) a step of faith.

When Jesus was walking on the water and invited Peter to step out, it was a Kairos moment in Peter’s life that would show (or not) the trust he had in his Lord. When Saul was knocked to the ground and (made blind) and heard the voice of Jesus speak, it was a Kairos moment (in his life) in which (his response) would lead to (or not) his becoming the apostle Paul.

Now, those are some of the big Kairos moments in scripture. Times when something significant (and out-of-the-ordinary) happened that played an important part in that (particular person’s) life. Some of us have had those kinds of moments. Some of us not. It doesn’t matter.

What we’ve all had and what we all (will have) are moments when God is trying to get our attention and speak. How do we hear it? How do we know? How can we be sure?

What I want to do today, on this first day of our series, on the day when (after worship, this afternoon), we’ll be meeting as a congregation to talk about and make decisions for the coming year, I want to start by touching on two of the texts we just read. From there, share a bit about where we’ve been in this past year and what’s in front of us in the year ahead. And then, I want to close it out by challenging you to join me in what (I believe) we need to be doing as a congregation and in each of our own lives over the next several weeks.

Let’s start with the texts. The first is from Mark’s gospel, chapter one, the story of Jesus’ calling of the first disciples. It’s a familiar story, a story we’ve read before, and yet one in which there’s something going on worth noting.

Did you notice what happened in that story of Jesus' calling of those first disciples? Before calling them, before inviting them into a relationship with him that would ultimately change their life, did you notice what happened? Jesus made a statement. He made a statement that literally set the stage for everything that follows. And the statement (he made) was the first words (in Mark's gospel) out of his mouth. Remember what he said?

He said, "The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." ("The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.")

Not coincidental (in this series) that the word Jesus uses (for time) when he says "the time has come", is the word Kairos. Not the time of day, or the time of the week, or what time it is in the month or the year, (chronological time), but in (the course of time) at a particular moment in time.

This is the time (Jesus says) when there's something (going on) that God wants you to hear. This is the moment in time (he tells them) when there's something happening that you do not want to miss. And what was happening, (what was going on), not to miss, was the coming and the appearance of Christ.

Now, what follows (in the story) is the call of the first disciples. What follows (in the story) is a daily call, a lifelong call, a moment-by-moment call to follow Jesus.

You know, it's interesting (in life) that whenever God calls us (or speaks) to us that we're always left with a choice. Have you noticed that? That when God works (in life) to get your attention, wants you to hear something, that it always requires a response? And, even more interesting is the fact that the response we make says a lot about our willingness to trust.

You're sitting in church (on a Sunday morning) and listening to a message. There's (something said) that you'd never heard before, or that, maybe even more often, (you need to hear) that causes you to think. When that happens, don't think it's just the preacher (and his idea), or her idea. It might actually be the voice of God. What are you going to do with that?

You're reading your Bible, the story of Jesus telling his disciples to forgive not seven times but seventy-times-seven, and (all of a sudden) you think about that person you're having a hard time forgiving. Don't think (for a moment) that that's not God's voice trying to tell you something. He's speaking. And when he speaks, you're left with a choice. What are you going to do?

"The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe." There's always an action connected to the calling of Jesus. There's always a response (we're called to make) when God (in those Kairos moments) breaks in and speaks.

And that leads to the second passage, our first lesson today, about Elijah and God's voice to him. It's a long story, a number of twisted (and twisting) plots. We didn't read all of it. (It doesn't really matter.) Bottom line, Elijah was ready to quit. He's was (in the process) of giving up. Chased by wicked Queen Jezebel, wanting to put him to death, Elijah was hiding in a cave.

Now, without going back and reading it again, (you remember), God tells him to get up and go outside and stand on the mountain, because God was ready to speak. And so he does. He stands on the mountain...and what happens? A number of things.

"A great and powerful wind (it says)...tore the mountain and shattered the rocks...but (it says) the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake...but the Lord was not in the earthquake either. After the earthquake, a fire...but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire (it says), came a gentle whisper." Some translations say, "A still small voice." And it was the voice of God, and he began to speak, and Elijah was left with a choice.

The call of God, Kairos moments, God speaking to us in a still small voice? Let's talk for a moment about where we've been (as a congregation), on this annual meeting day. What's happened in this past year? What were the last twelve months all about?

I'll tell you, there were a lot of good things that happened in the past twelve months. This past year was filled with times and places and people in and which and through God was at work.

Some of the things on-site: in our children's ministry, our Junior and Senior High youth, our middle hour, our quilting groups, our worship... things like Village House, Water for Water, VBS, our FISH Food Pantry, some of the Bible classes and fellowship events and gatherings of seniors, the renewal of our MOPS ministry. There's a long list of things (on-site) that happened (in this past year) worth noting and celebrating...a long list.

The same was true off-site. Our work with City Team, the homeless ministries, our Mission to Mexico, (only to mention a few); to say nothing of the things our members were doing (in their own lives) that had no direct connection with the church. God is using this church in some big ways. This past year was filled with blessings. A lot happening, it really was.

It was also a year that had some challenges. Full transparency, 2018 was one of the most challenging years (as a pastor) that I've ever had; one of the most challenging years for our elected leaders.

The two biggest challenges were related to the two communications we sent out (to the congregation) in the past two months. The one relating to the change in our pastoral ministry, a mutual separation between Pastor Brian and St. Timothy's. A man who loves the Lord and who loved us, (and we loved him), and some good things were happening. (They really were.) But it was a change (nonetheless) needing to be made, and so we did, and now (we're both) moving on.

The second, in relation to what's happened with our school. (We sent out a letter this past week.) After 40 years of life-changing and transforming work, we made the hard decision to close the elementary portion of our Academy and move forward with building and developing the Preschool. After several years of trying to increase the elementary enrollment, it wasn't happening, and so we made a decision, and it was hard one, and now we're moving on.

Those were two of the most difficult decisions (I've been involved with) in my 32-plus years of ministry...same with our leaders. They were gut-wrenching, tough decisions, but ones (I believe) were the right decisions and Spirit-led. In both cases, we did a lot of praying, a lot of sharing, a lot of discerning and listening and (trying to hear) that still small voice.

2018 was a good year, a blessed year, a challenging year. In many ways, it was a year of pruning and cutting back. I liken it to Jesus' parable of the vine and the branches and of how (in every life) and congregation and ministry, for fruit to be borne, (at times) pruning needs to take place. And pruning is never fun. It's hard work, (it's tough), and it can hurt.

But when it happens, something is (always) on the other side that leads to growth. And that's where this next year comes in. This past week, I started compiling a list of things that will be in front of us in the coming year.

It's an exciting list. It's an encouraging list. It's a list filled with possibilities for where and when (and how) God might lead. But just like this past year, it's a challenging list. It a list (filled with) a number of unanswered questions and uncertain directions in which, (at least for the moment), while we're trying to answer them and (figure things out), what we need to do is to listen and to wait and to pray for God to speak.

Related to the pastoral change that happened (this past year), we need to be planning and thinking about what's going to happen in the next few years. You'll hear more about that this afternoon, what's already in the works to address that particular question.

We've put together (what we're calling) a Transition Team that is tasked with helping us figure it out. They'll be compiling information, sharing it with our leaders, and then coming back to the congregation (as a whole) with some recommendations.

In fact, (with that in mind) we have already set a date for our next congregational meeting. Ten weeks from today, Sunday, April 7, we'll come together again and hear a report from that team (and our leaders), along with their recommendations, and then (together) we'll make some decisions and move ahead. There's a lot of work to be done, a lot of prayer that's needed.

As far as our school is concerned, it's the same thing. There are all kinds of possibilities. With a campus that will become (more vacant) over the summer, what are the next steps God is calling us to take? Expanding the Preschool? Beginning to develop and provide even younger (and much needed) infant care? Doing some after-school programs? Re-purposing this campus with which we've been blessed?

Beyond (all of that), is there another ministry God has on the horizon (for us) to consider and to take on? Are there possibilities we've never thought of that God wants (and is preparing) for us to do? Is it even possible that we would re-start our school in a few years, and do it in a way (moving forward) that would set us up (in stronger ways) for success?

I'm not saying there is, or there are, or we will, or any of what I've just shared is what God wants. (I'm not saying that.) Don't mishear it. At this time, we don't know for sure.

What we do know (for sure) is that God does want, and he will use us (and this place), and he speaks. And when he speaks, we have a choice. When he calls, it requires (of us) that we respond.

So here's what I want to do. Here's what I'm planning to do. And I'm asking you (as a congregation) to join me. Between today (the day of our Annual Meeting) and April 7, the day of our next congregational meeting, I am planning to spend time each day in prayer. Talking with God, sharing with him the questions I have, the challenges we face, and the possibilities and potential options I see.

More importantly, I'm going to spend time each day, in prayer, in his Word, and in conversation with others, listening for his voice, listening for what he wants us to hear.

I don't know what he will tell us. I don't know what he will say. But he will speak (as he has promised), and we will be able to hear (if we listen), and his voice (to us), if only in small ways, will become clear.

I believe these next 70 days can (and will be) a Kairos time for us (here at St. Timothy's), a time when we will be presented with a choice. I'll be praying each day. I'm asking you (as my brothers and sisters in the faith) to do the same.

In closing today, and we'll plan to do something similar each week (over the next ten weeks), in just a moment, I'll be closing our time in prayer. I'll start the prayer, offer a few words...and then we'll have a couple minutes of silent prayer, with a chance for each of us to spend time with God, offer any prayers we'd like to share with him, and to be listening for his voice. And then I'll close with one final prayer before we move on in our worship.

Over these next 70 days, if there are thoughts and ideas you believe God is laying on your heart, we'd like to know. Not your own thoughts and ideas, but thoughts and ideas you believe are from God. Call us, text us, talk with us, write them down. (We want to know.)

For 70 days, be praying for God's voice to be heard...in our life as a congregation, for our leaders as they work together (to serve), and in your own life and faith-walk with Christ...be praying for God's voice to be heard and for ears to listen...Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you for the calling we have in Jesus, for your promise to lead and to guide, and for those Kairos moments in which you speak. Lord, we pray that this time (in our life together), these next 70 days, would become one of those Kairos times for us. Open our hearts, clear our minds and our wills, and allow and enable us to listen, even now as we spend this time in prayer...

Lord, thank you for hearing our prayers and for giving us ears to hear...your still small voice. In Jesus' name. Amen.