

September 24, 2016    "Listening To God's Voice"    Philippians 4:4-9

The apostle Paul wrote many letters. Philippians is not the longest by any stretch of the imagination. But I have to admit it is a special book in the New Testament library, to me. For one thing, my own life verse is in Philippians...chapter 1:21. "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." I recognized that, dangerously close to 50 years ago. I was asked on a questionnaire put out by The Mission Board of The Presbyterian Church In Canada, to summarize in one sentence what ministry meant to me. I was concluding a 3 year assignment as student minister to 3 little churches south of Peterborough, and about to be ordained and appointed by the Mission Board to Kapuskasing and Cochrane. I thought about the question and the answer was there before me in a few minutes...to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Amen. So be it.

This morning we have turned to the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Philippian letter. We are exploring a sensitive issue...listening to God's voice. I do. And no...I am not crazy! Some of you having been to the coffee house, and listened to our offerings by way of song and entertainment have been very complimentary. It has been over 50 years since I gave up any ambition to make entertaining, singing and playing for paying audiences, my life's work. How did I make that choice? How did I decide? I listened to God's voice. In some ways there was no choice, except the choice of obedience or rebellion. God's voice said come, now, it is time. If I made a choice, it was a choice to respond. Here we are. I will tell you a secret, I have not shared with anyone here before. When I concluded my 15 months as pulpit supply here before John Young arrived and served 2 years as minister here, I knew, I would be back. I listened to God's voice. HE said the hardest thing HE ever says to us as people...be

patient. Wait. Wait and be ready.

Here is the question. Crazy people often claim they hear the voice of God. Willful and power hungry people often justify their actions by claiming to listen to God's voice. Obviously there is a problem here. How do we know we are listening to God's voice and not simply imposing our wills on unfolding circumstances and other people? It is a good question. It needs to be explored. Philippians 4:4-9, provides us with some sign posts. Clues if you will. Insight.

It comes as no surprise to me that someone would set these words to music and want to sing them. "Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice!" Last Saturday night we shared many song experiences by all joining in on the chorus even if the song was new to us. Well if there is a chorus in the Philippian letter it contains the word rejoice. Rejoice and joy are mentioned 14 times in this letter. It makes the point that discipleship, following Jesus ought to be a very upbeat and happy experience. An experience that is positive. "For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Most people cannot say anything positive about the idea of death and dying. Following Jesus transforms that reality. If I live...I get to serve Jesus...If I die...I get to be with Jesus. Heads I win, tails I win!!

Here is my point. If you are looking for an acid test about hearing God's voice, it will always lead you into something that you will feel is very positive. When Paul appealed to Caesar and went as a prisoner to Rome he did so with his eyes wide open. If Caesar acquitted him of the charges against him...Paul knew he would be a winner. If he was put to death in Rome, he knew he would get to speak about Jesus before the most important figures in the Empire, in the capital city of the Empire. And his attitude was "I

rejoice that I may serve the Lord.” If you are hearing the voice of God, and being called to follow HIS leading...your reaction, response will be...I cannot lose.

Second point. The end of verse 5 and the beginning of verse 6 include these 2 sentences. “The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything.” There is a peace that settles upon us, as we begin to do what God has called us to do. And I am not just talking about ministers and elders when I say this. Being God's person, led by God's Spirit, having been given our marching orders by the Lord or HIS angels, is an experience that bares the fruit of peace. When Shadrack, Meshack and Abednigo, entered the firey furnace...the surprisinsg element for us as readers of that story, that history is that they were not struggling to free themselves. They were at peace. God was near and they knew it. They were literally in God's hands and they recognized that fact. God was with them in the midst of the flames. And they were marvelously, miraculously, at peace about the whole thing. Remember how that story ended? Even the King Nebuchadnezzar recognized he had raised his hand against the servants of the living God.

There was a time when I would really stew and lose sleep over the church and my work in its midst. You almost have to grow old enough to recognize that it is a fact. Worrying solves nothing. Worrying never changes the outcome. The only thing accomplished through fretting and losing sleep is weariness and indegestion. Complex problems are difficult to solve. No question. But worrying about doing your job, or doing what is right, or being God's servant in specific circumstances...the worry part serves no one and accomplishes nothing. Which is why the apostle's pastoral advice is pray, put it before God, and leave it there. Let HIM give

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you the peace the world will never supply.

Paul gives us another piece of advice. “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable...think on these things.” He is not just saying think positively. Stop and think about those terms...truth, nobility, righteousness, purity, and so on...they are what in the old days we would have called absolute terms. Absolute terms have to do with the very nature of God. And the one book that causes me to think about the nature of God is the Bible in all its parts, chapters, and verses.

If you think that God is speaking to you, giving you insight, calling you to do something.... if it is God's voice, HE will never ask you to do something contrary to or in contradiction of Biblical teaching. To turn that around and put it in positive terms, if it is God's voice that you are hearing, HIS message will echo what you find in the written word of HOLY SCRIPTURE. Thinking on the words found in the Word of God written...is the simplest and best measure of the fact that God is not only speaking to us, but leading us and guiding us into a particular course of action, and particular course of service. Think on Biblical things and you will be thinking about the truth. Noble words and ideas. It will have to do with righteousness...doing the right thing in ultimate terms. There will be a sense of purity to what is involved. Think on these things. God does not contradict Himself. He does not contradict HIS word written. Knowing your Bible, reading it, will help you hear HIS voice and to recognize the voice of the Master.

We can never say we have learned what the Bible says. There are not enough hours in the day, or a lifetime. We do need to

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be continually embracing the word, reading it, studying it, and letting HIS Spirit guide us in the way of the truth.

Paul makes us a promise, as a follower of Jesus that is reassuring. “Whatever you have learned, received, heard from me...or seen in me...put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” There are those who like to take shots at Paul for these words. (who does he think he is?) I will answer that question as plainly as I can. Having put his life on the line for the Gospel...testifying to the Lordship of Christ, Paul claims he is a servant of God.

To those who have heard him in person he says put the Gospel into practice as I have taught it. The God of peace will be with you. Many of those who heard Paul and had seen Paul and learned under him the basics of discipleship to Jesus, would pay a high price for doing so. Persescution. Martyrdom. The loss of everything associated with this world and life in it. Paul says, “Do it. God Himself, Jesus Himself, the Holy Spirit Himself, the God of peace...will be with you.

It is a fearsome thing to hear the voice of God. I am not a brave man. I fear physical pain. I fear rejection. I like to be liked. But what I value most of all at this end of my life is to experience the pleasure of God in what I am doing and saying. Paul promises me I will experience the presence of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit if I live and share the Gospel. That is why I am here and among you. And that is why I will always be bold enough to say...I have heard the voice of God.

I promise you faith and faithfulness to this God who is in

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Christ Jesus will bring you the same experience. The God of peace will be with you. And as Jackie Gleason used to say..."How sweet it is!"

Let us pray;

Dear Lord grant that we may hear your voice and hearing it recognize it as the voice of the One God, world without end. Sharpen our skills. Cause your word to live in us. Grant that the cause of our lives might be to serve you in whatever way we can and may. Grant us the light that shines in the darkness. In Jesus name we pray...Amen.