

Spiritual Growth, Here and Now
I Samuel 3:1-10 and John 1:43-51
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
January 14, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

The images of the California mudslides are unbelievable. First responders plucked people from their roofs and their vehicles. The rain was extreme. At one point it came down at an inch an hour. At least fifteen people lost their lives. One Santa Barbara resident said, “It sounded like a freight train coming right by the house.” Another said, “We thought the noise [must be] helicopters over our house; it was that loud.”

The mud and water closed major roads. It left homes ruined, tens of thousands of people without power.

A freight train. Helicopters. Sometimes we listen with our ears, or look with our eyes. We are pretty sure what we hear or what we see. At first it may sound like a train or a chopper, but then we recognize the overwhelming.

What happens when we look and listen with our hearts, not just with eyes and ears?

God gave us not only eyes and ears and taste and smell and touch. God also gave us hearts. It is our hearts that get involved when we see the toddler alone and crying on the playground. It is our hearts that are touched when the homes of hundreds upon hundreds are destroyed in the hurricanes. It is our hearts through which we look and listen when God calls.

That’s what happens in this morning’s scriptures. God calls.

Sometimes it’s too easy for you and me to take the Bible and its stories and put them all aside. To place the Bible back on the shelf or pulpit or lectern. To think those special moments in scripture only have to do with prophets and apostles and Bible Figures – capital B, capital F.

But something happens – something happens to them *and* to us - when we look and listen with our hearts.

Samuel’s life is completely redirected. Nathanael discovers the Lamb of God, the Messiah, the One who washes us clean from our faults and failings.

Samuel’s heart is touched and changed. Nathanael’s heart is made tender and transformed. Because they look and listen with their hearts. God’s invitation to them *and us* is clear and profound.

Jill Duffield, the editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, was our Faith Focus Weekend speaker last year. This is how she talks about the simplicity and beauty of God’s invitation to Nathanael through Philip.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” [Nathanael replies to Philip.] Philip doesn’t defend Nazareth. He doesn’t chide Nathanael for his biases or call him out for his lack of cultural sensitivity. He simply says, ‘Come and see.’ Don’t believe me? Come and see for yourself.

“It’s like Jesus’ invitation to Philip a few verses back, ‘Follow me.’ . . . No sales pitch. No promises of what they will discover. No cajoling or guilt or reward or expectations. Just an invitation, no strings attached.

“You may accept or decline. You may come exactly as you are. No need to get changed, bring a hostess gift, RSVP even. Your cynicism, skepticism, biases, assumptions are all welcome as well. You can stay as long as you like or leave without notice. Maybe everything you have ever heard and believed about Nazareth will be confirmed. No one will attempt to convince you otherwise. Come and see.

Jill closes with this question and invitation: “What might happen if we church people emulated Jesus and Philip and stopped being defensive and started being invitational? Honestly open to whatever opinion others may have about us, about Jesus, about the church, about Christians?

‘Nothing good can come out of Christianity.’ Come and see.

‘Christians are judgmental and exclusive.’ Come and see.

‘The institution of the church is irrelevant.’ Come and see.

‘No one will speak to me.’ Come and see.

‘People will judge me for how I look or talk or think or believe.’ Come and see.

‘I am beyond redemption.’ ‘[It’s too late for me to change.]’ Come and see.

When we and our neighbors come and open ourselves, when we look and listen with our hearts, this is what we see. Ordinary people dedicated to compassion and service. Imperfect yet determined people who work wholeheartedly to strengthen our faith.

- Preschool teachers and staff who love and love and love and love the young children of our community.

- Gifted teachers who help us to negotiate our grief, embrace spiritual practices, and discover faith in the decisions of our daily lives.

- A community which is vital and vibrant in questing and seeking and loving and growing.

And that’s all only from the first page of our bulletin announcements this morning.

Something happens when we look and listen with our hearts. We grow. We grow spiritually, here and now.

You may recall me speaking of Helen, a dear person I came to know back in Indianapolis. I first met Helen at the hospital bedside of her husband, John. He had been estranged from the church for many years, virtually his whole life. But after he was diagnosed with his terminal illness, he reached out to us, the local Presbyterian church. He wanted us to visit him. We did. He wanted us to listen to him. We did. He wanted us to baptize him. We did.

When I first met Helen in John’s hospital room, her eyes were blazing and her expression red hot. John was tender, open, ready and willing for the Holy Spirit to move in his heart, Helen was dubious, suspicious, afraid and angry that we might try to take advantage of her beloved husband.

I didn’t try to persuade Helen of anything. She was there as we visited and listened and baptized and prayed. She was there as we loved him. She was there as we loved him to the end.

After John’s death, I didn’t think I would ever see Helen again. But several months later, she appeared at worship – on the very back pew, farthest from the pulpit. She came occasionally, and then more than occasionally, and then regularly. I watched her soften as she learned to look and listen with her heart. I watched her experience God’s love as she discovered grace through the embrace of that congregation.

She became a member of our church. It was a great day. I think I heard the angels singing.

Several years later, Helen developed a devastating illness. I sat with her only a few days before she died. She had become very dear to me. I was broken as I had watched her decline, with so very little strength at the end. At the end, when she was weak, so very, very weak, I remember asking her softly, “How are you, Helen?”

This was her reply: “Every day, I try to do something good for someone.”

Even through her doubt and suspicion, she opened herself. Moment to moment, she was changed. She was changed because she found the courage to come and see.

Seven months ago, we moved back into our sanctuary. What a great day! We sang just the right hymn that morning, number 301 in our Glory to God Hymnal, “Let Us Build a House.”

This is the first verse:

*Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive,
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace,
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.*

It's been seven months now, but the room is still not quite finished. It's 99.9%, but not yet completely done. We have realized those beautiful doors on the center aisle, separating the sanctuary from the narthex, just don't open broadly enough.

They open quite a bit. But not enough. We are going to rework the mechanics on the top of the doors so that they can open – fully, completely, stretching to the point to welcome all.

I'm not an early-morning church person. I am not one to often suggest breakfast meetings or early-morning get togethers. The mornings find me reading the Herald-Tribune, exercising on the elliptical machine, having an egg or two for breakfast, walking at Benderson Park.

Over the last several months, a few members of the church have thanked me for the photos I post of sunrise over Benderson Lake. Sometimes I take a picture or two as I'm walking, and add them to social media, along with a scripture or thought.

A few mornings ago, I walked around the lake, starting almost an hour before sunrise. The fog was thick, really thick. I was sure there was absolutely nothing worth taking a photo of; at some points, I could barely see fifty feet ahead. But as the sun rose, completely obscured by the fog, I realized I was still straining to see with my eyes, with my eyes only. So I pulled out my iPhone and took a picture, and I saw the unexpected beauty in the thickness, the cloud, the opacity. I remembered that we walk by faith and not by sight. I was reminded that we must look and listen not with eyes and ears, but with our hearts.

Some would call us foolish. Helen died. The mudslides continued. Farmworkers struggle for fair housing. We Christians are sometimes judgmental and exclusive. We still worry if we are beyond redemption.

But through it all, my heart sings. My heart sings as I see *you* who are dedicated to compassion and service, *you* who work to strengthen our faith, *you* who nurture our children, *you* who teach and serve and pray and forgive.

My heart sings, even when the sun is hidden in the fog. My heart sings.