



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

Reverend Sue Hamilton  
June 23, 2019 Sermon

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## Listening for God in a World Full of Distractions

Scripture: Psalm 101, John 1-:1-10

Steve and I were privileged to go to Scotland with thirty-five others from Westminster in May. This trip, in the planning for nine months was eagerly anticipated. Finding a little time to read ahead on places we would visit, I was still surprised, delighted and intrigued by the country's beauty and its story, its people and contribution to society as a whole. Three weeks ago during the first summer Sunday school class following worship members from our group shared highlights of their experience. For all, it was a memorable, enjoyable and faith shaping time. Some of us were teased just a bit while traveling for our exuberance each time we noticed a white or black faced wooly creature along the road or hillside, though I dare say the Scotland sheep are something none of us will forget. It was spring after all, and the adorable lambs were almost everywhere with the exception of the cities.

A moment of lasting significance began to unfold for me when our guide, Pauline, realizing our affinity for sheep, offered instruction prior to our boarding the ferry to Iona. "On the island if you encounter a closed gate you are free to go through but make sure you latch it behind you." Gates keep the sheep safe.

Walking to the beach on that beautifully sunny afternoon Steve and I encountered such a gate. I have walked through countless enclosures in my life, but never, I believe, one where I was so keenly aware of its intended and needed purpose. Already captivated by these precious lambs, I did not wish any harm to befall them and certainly not on my account. I opened and closed the gate carefully.

Hours later and back on the bus the ride to the hotel was quieter than normal. Iona had been a special place, a thin place as it is often referred, where the veil between heaven and earth is lifted, and God's presence is wondrously known. I was grateful to have time to savor the day. The image of the gate that opened the way to a restful beach and clear aqua water unlike any I had ever seen stayed with me. Looking out the coach window I smiled at the sight of more sheep. My mind meandered its way to the gospel of John and Jesus' use of the gate and shepherd metaphor. Unaware at the time these images were already at play within my heart, issuing invitation to deeper reflection and prayer. And so, my sermon this morning might more accurately be described as a meditation, yet nonetheless one where I hope new areas of discovery will open for you as well.

The gospel reading today is a familiar and comforting one. Prior to these verses Jesus has just healed a man born blind on the Sabbath and the Pharisees question his action and the blindness of the man. Upset at the man's testimony they ultimately drive him away. Jesus finds the man and talks to him. He professes faith in Jesus. Jesus explains this is why he came so that "those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind," referencing the Pharisees. (John 9:39)

Now in chapter ten the contrast between Jesus and the faithless religious leaders continues but in a different way. Using the familiar image of shepherding Jesus contrasts the action of the shepherd who enters by the gate to lead the sheep out verses the action of a thief or bandit who come in by another way with the intention of doing harm. The sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd who calls them by name while they run from strangers, again referencing Jesus' opponents, most likely the Pharisees. The difference is clear, thieves come to steal and kill and destroy, while Jesus offers protection, guidance and life abundant.

Sounds simple in theory; follow Jesus or thieves or bandits, not even a choice, but we know from the living of life that recognizing truth in contrast to deception, and living in ways that lead to life is not always clear to see or easy to discern. Because of this I found myself pondering how sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd. Can they really do this? Sitting at the computer I watched some video clips on YouTube, which of course is not the most accurate way to check validity. Clip after clip showed dutiful sheep responding in large numbers when hearing their caretaker's voice.

Still not sure I consulted two members of our congregation both with long-term experience with sheep and have to say their experience differed. One clearly experienced sheep regularly responding to his voice, and the other not so much, often only when food was given. With my bubble somewhat burst I engaged in a little research and discovered that in traditional agrarian societies, then and now, locked enclosures to project the sheep were customary and often close to the shepherd's house. "Thievery was common and caused a devastating loss, since sheep were a source of food (meat and milk) and clothing and a major source of barter for other necessary goods.

Also confirmed in these ancient and current traditional societies is that the shepherd often knows each sheep by name, and they in turn respond to his distinctive call. Drawing contrast to Western practice where the shepherd follows the herd, in the Middle East one can still see the shepherd walking out in front of their herd, repeatedly calling to them to keep them together."<sup>1</sup>

Relieved or perhaps reassured, I returned to my meditation, this time asking why this verse about hearing had captured my intrigue. Pausing, I realized this is what I wanted too, to hear and experience the intimate presence of God. I venture to say you share this longing, to know and to be assured that God is with you and intimately cares. How do we go about such listening, especially in a world filled with constant noise and many distractions? How does one wade through the myriad of life complexities to hear God's voice or know the wonder of Holy Presence or experience a nudge of divine guidance?

Though we might wish, we know there is not a magic formula to be taken or a "how to book" to be read that offers a simple or ready answer. Common sense tells us there are things within our control that heighten our ability to see and perceive; adequate rest, a balance between work and play, a healthy diet, time for exercise, each contributes to one's overall well-being and ability to take in. As people of faith, we know that what we immerse ourselves in heightens spiritual sensitivity; the worship of God, the study of scripture, the reading of good literature, the quiet of prayer, the beauty of nature and the enjoyment of the arts, the gift of human relationship, each opens us more fully to the divine in and around us.

Yet there are practices that can be tried and intentionally honed, and with regularity of use make a significant difference in the way we live out our lives. These past two weeks I have been rereading a book that has meant a great deal to me and is worthy of regular review. Titled *Landmarks an Ignatian Journey* by Margaret Silf, she tells the story of St. Ignatius of Loyola, and his journey to God, the discoveries he makes and spiritual insights he gains, and suggests to the reader how to put these discoveries and insights into practice.

Born in Spain in 1491, Ignatius lived a colorful early life where his focus rested largely on two things; winning the hand of a noble lady and achieving greatness and recognition in battle. Things didn't turn out, however, as he planned. Severely injured in battle he spent most of the next year recuperating. Unable to obtain something lively to read, like a romantic novel, at his disposal were two choices; *A Life of Christ* and *Lives of the Saints*. With little else to do he began to read. He would soon discover that the love of God was moving and working within him long before he was ever listening.

As he reads something interesting occurs. Prone to daydream Ignatius begins to notice and compare his dreams. When he dreams about beautiful women and military success, which he often did, he is left exhilarated, but soon afterward this exhilaration begins to wane. Looking down at his wounded leg any excitement disappears altogether. When he immerses himself in reading about the life of Christ, though still operating

largely from his ego, Ignatius envisions himself serving Christ in grandiose ways. These dreams also leave him exhilarated, but the notable difference is found in the days that follow. He remains excited and eager. The feeling of exhilaration has not left.

Paying attention to his dreams was the beginning of a life changing journey, a life time journey of spiritual discernment, of noticing what drew him closer to God's love and what moved him away.

Paying attention can be life changing for us too. Whether it is reading scripture and noticing what makes you pause, ask questions, or wonder, or what moves you in a movie or in the listening to a piece of music, what may bother you in a conversation or challenge you when engaging in an activity or endeavor, are all invitations to stop, ponder and listen. In stopping and in reflection, the engaging of inner work clears way for God's voice to be heard.

Making time for personal reflection can be done daily. Called a Review of Consciousness or Daily Examen, Ignatius found it helpful to recall and review the happenings of each day at days end, in fact he felt it more important than any other type of prayer. There are many ways to do this, but basically it is done through the asking of two contrasting questions. I like to switch them up, but two of my favorites are: "What parts of the day made me feel most alive?" and secondly, "What part of the day left me feeling drained of energy?" With regular practice patterns of activity or emotional response may appear opening the way for discernment and choice. With regard to the questions just asked, it makes sense to create room for things that are life-giving and to be on the lookout for those things that continually drain. God speaks through the asking of both questions, but holy nudges may more easily be noticed when one feels alive.

There are many helpful insights and practices to try in St. Ignatius Spiritual Exercises, but I will quickly highlight one more, that I think is easily understood and relatable. Referenced with the words, drawn or driven, Margaret Sif asks the reader to consider: "In a particular situation, am I feeling drawn, powerfully maybe, but always gently, or am I feeling driven?" She offers a simple test. "Recall a time when someone asked you to do something, and remember if you can your response. Did you say "Yes" because you felt you really, deep down, wanted to do it, or did you go along with it to please someone else or to avoid conflict, but against your deeper inclinations? The action of God on our live is always, at its heart, experienced as drawing. If we are feeling driven, then the prompting that gives rise to it is not from God but from the force-fields of our own (or other people's) kingdoms."<sup>2</sup>

I find this a helpful check point, especially on things deemed very important. Am I being drawn towards something, where attention is generally focused outside and beyond myself, that lifts my heart so that I can see the joys and sorrows of other people, or am I being driven, where my focus is turned inward and can quickly take over my whole consciousness depleting my energy. Physically, the aspect of drawing might be observed with an open hand beckoning and the driven nature by a closed hand that is clenched. Discerning the movement of God's spirit upon our lives poses a greater challenge when we are operating from a driven state."

I would like to close with a story, a parable, entitled "The Explorer," by Anthony DeMello. "A man leaves his home village to explore the faraway and exotic Amazon. When he returns to his village, the villagers are captivated as the explorer tries to describe his many experiences, along with the incredible beauty of the place, with its thundering waterfalls, beautiful foliage, and extraordinary wildlife. How can he put into words, though, the feeling that flooded his heart when he heard the night sounds of the forest or sensed the dangers of the rapids? So he tells them they simply must go to the Amazon themselves.

To help them with their journey, the explorer draws a map. Immediately the villagers pounce on the map. They copy the map, so that everyone can have his or her own copy. They frame the map for their town hall and their homes. Regularly they study the map and discuss it often, until the villagers consider themselves experts on the Amazon—for do they not know the location of every waterfall and rapids, every turn and bend?"<sup>3</sup> Experts maybe, but of something they never experienced.

We also have been given maps to guide us, the Holy Scriptures, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and the work of countless other faithful disciples, written to help us listen, to see and to follow. But what if we were to just hold on to these maps, or frame a favorite verse for all to see, or even memorize the Great Commandment that Jesus spoke to his disciples, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37, 39) You could list page after page ways to love God and neighbor, but would they be transforming, would they make a difference, if not engaged in or practiced?

Each of our journeys are unique, but as I was reminded putting these thoughts together, that first began on a sunny afternoon in Scotland, it is through our asking and in our searching, in our discovery and in our finding, that God's voice is heard, a process that repeats itself again and again. Sometimes we hear God speak in immediate or astounding ways, but more often than not insight is discovered gradually with thought and engagement. If there is a key, I think it might be noticing. Certainly this is what Ignatius found to be so powerful. You might practice this week. What moves you or catches your attention? It just might be the place where God desires to reveal or unfold something new.

Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Following and pursuing what gives life to us and others, is better than daydreaming. It is life changing. The psalmist writes,

I accompany those who love You, that I may grow in wisdom;  
I enter into the Silence, into the Eternal Light,  
and listen for your gentle Voice.  
For, no one who oppresses another,  
who keeps company with injustice,  
will dwell in the house of Love.

And, no one who prefers darkness will live in the glory of Light.

In the morning I offer myself to You in prayer,  
by night I surrender to You in trust;  
O, that I might walk in the Light with a grateful heart,  
and radiate peace to the world!<sup>4</sup>

May it be so. Amen.

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