

When I was a senior in college, I wanted to do an internship at a non-profit community development organization as part of my studies. I carefully researched a variety of possibilities and sent resumes to those whose work was of the most interest to me. Within a couple of weeks, my list was narrowed to three different organizations – two in Washington, DC, and one in the heart of Appalachia in Southwest Virginia. I scheduled interviews over a two-day period, driving from Richmond, to Ivanhoe deep in mining country and back up to Washington, DC.

By that time in my life, I had a developing sense of God’s guiding presence in my life, so I prayed with great intention that God would lead me to the best opportunity and to the place where I could make the fullest contribution. I was sure that God had a very specific plan for my life, and I wanted to be obedient to that plan and follow God’s will, so I prayed that God would show me the exact job that God was calling me to in that moment. I prayed that God would make it abundantly clear – I think I actually used those words – abundantly clear – to me what I was supposed to do over the course of that semester. I was sure there was a “right” answer and a “wrong” answer, and that it was of utmost importance to the rest of my life that I determine which was which. I thought that if I just prayed enough – and with enough intention – that God would direct things such that there would be no confusion in the matter. In all honesty I thought this meant that I would go on these interviews and that I’d be offered one of the jobs. Then it would be abundantly clear where I was supposed to be. I was supposed to be working for the one organization that hired me.

At the conclusion of my two day tour of interviews, I was terribly pleased with myself that I had landed all three positions and now had three really intriguing internship possibilities, but I was also more than just a little miffed that God had not made it abundantly clear what I was to do – which internship was the ONE for me.

Let me interject something here to put this embarrassment of riches into context – I was free, full-time, unskilled, but highly teachable labor. I made good economic sense to these three non profit organizations, hence the three offers.

When I got home and shared my conundrum and confusion with a friend of mine, he asked me, “What did you expect? That God would write a message in the sky like the

wicked witch of the west in the Wizard of Oz telling you what to do?” I may or may not have just been standing outside staring up at the clouds before he said this. And as ludicrous as it all was, I had to admit that “yes” that’s sort of what I had in mind, perhaps not really in the form of cloud formations, but a narrowing of choices would have done the trick. If I’d only received one offer, I would have been certain that God had ordered things just so such that I would have been exactly where God wanted me. I would have been certain that I was being obedient to God and following God’s will and plan for my life. Instead, I had to do the hard work of engaging in conversations with folks about the course of my life. I had to do the hard work of living with the ambiguity of real life. I had to do the hard work of trusting God’s guiding presence in my life, not like a puppeteer, but something more like an invisible current making its way and taking shape within the shifting contours of my daily existence. Instead I had to do the hard work of learning to listen – really listen.

Today’s reading from the Old Testament is about the call story of the great prophet Samuel, who would usher in the era of the kings of Israel. As a boy in the service of the priest Eli, Samuel wakes up one night to the sound of someone calling his name. Three times this happens, and three times he goes running to Eli thinking it is him calling to him in the night. Eli finally recognizes the sound for what it is and so instructs Samuel to respond saying simply, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

The story of Samuel is set in a time when the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread. Now when we hear the phrase, the Word of the Lord, we tend to think of text, specifically Scripture, but in the Old Testament, the word of the Lord is about revelation – it’s about the manifestation of a message from God – it’s about the disclosure of some truth that is hidden or obscure¹ – it’s about the nature of listening and hearing.

One of the things we learn in this story is that listening and hearing and being attentive to God’s active, guiding presence in the world is something of a “communal affair.” Samuel and Eli needed each other to hear God and to begin to understand the unfolding of their lives, even, as in the case of Eli, it meant hearing something that he desperately did not want to hear. They had to listen deeply.

We too need to learn how to listen ever more deeply, and we need to understand this listening as a “communal affair.” We need each other to hear the word of the Lord. Henri Nouwen once wrote, “In true community, we are windows constantly offering each other new views on the mystery of God’s presence in our lives.”² This type of listening is not really about discovering the one and only “right way” of being. Rather it is more about discerning God’s guidance like an invisible current making its way and taking shape in the unfolding of our lives and the shifting contours of our daily existence. It is about the mystery of God’s presence.

At St. Andrew’s, we have been talking a lot about storytelling and story listening over the last year, and I invite you and encourage you to continue these practices, both informally and formally. We all have call stories – each one of us – stories of God’s movement in our lives, and all these stories come to their fullness – to their wholeness – in the context of community. When they are gathered up as one, it is possible to see and hear the bigger picture, the wider trajectory of the Spirit’s movements and God’s embrace. When we listen deeply together, when we hear our story as it takes shape within the stories of others, when we experience our story as it is caught up in God’s story, we come to discern more and more God’s guidance in the unfolding of our lives and the shifting contours of our daily existence. We come to discern more and more the truth of this mysterious presence as something, perhaps the only thing, that is abundantly clear.

¹ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/528734?seq=5>

² Henri J.M. Nouwen, compiled and edited by Wendy Wilson Greer. *The Only Necessary Thing*. p. 131.