

“Caller I.D.”

Gen. 12:1-9, Rom 4:13-27, Matt. 9:9-13, 18-26  
Hope Church, June 8, 2007, Lynn Japinga

A couple of months ago we were getting a flood of phone calls from mortgage companies, banks, charities. One night the phone rang and the caller i.d. said it was a mortgage company that I'd never heard of. So I picked up the receiver and set it down again, which is certainly rude but usually discourages the caller. Not this time. Two minutes later the phone rang again. Same company. This time I picked it up, and the woman asked for Mr. Ja-PING-ga which clearly indicates this is not a personal friend. And I launched a rather impolite rant about how we weren't interested and would they please stop bothering us. Finally the woman managed to break in: “But I don't WANT to sell you anything. All I want to do is talk to Jeff Ja-PING-ga about how much I appreciate the devotionals he writes for the Guideposts devotional book.”

I was very embarrassed.

Sometimes caller ID fails us. It doesn't always tell us who is on the other end of the phone call ... or why.

I would like a caller ID that tells us when God is calling.

This whole call business seemed so much clearer in the Bible. “Now the Lord said to Abram, Go to a land that I will show you.” And Abram didn't stall, or complain. He didn't establish a discernment committee. He didn't spend hours in prayer. He just went. He didn't know where exactly he was going, or why. He didn't even know much about this God who was calling him. But he went.

Jesus said to Matthew, “Follow me.” And Matthew left his lucrative but highly unpopular job as a tax collector and followed Jesus. This was not what you’d call a great career move either. But he responded to the call.

Now if we had caller ID that clearly said God or Jesus, we’d listen! We’d follow! We would do what God said! But God seems to prefer a less explicit method. God is more likely to suggest, or hint. You find yourself really enjoying a task. You are passionate about an issue. You have the resources to meet a need. You have the ability to do a job well. And sometimes the call is negatively phrased. You do not like your job. Or your company downsizes and you lose your job. Or your children all leave the nest. And these can all be the voice of God saying, go, or follow.

But I think the most confusing thing is when there are two calls. Two directions you might go. Jesus was on his way to the home of the man whose daughter had died. And he was interrupted by this unfortunate woman who touched him. Did he have time for her? Could he heal her? Or was his calling to go raise the daughter from the dead? Jesus could do both, but we can’t always. Most of us can only take one path at a time.

A student is trying to decide which college to attend. She has two attractive offers from two good colleges. She believes that God has a plan for her life and that God wants her to go to one particular college. There she will find her husband, her vocation, her friends. If she chooses the wrong one, she is in trouble. But she has prayed, she has listened, she has talked to people, and she can’t figure out which one God wants her to attend.

Does God play a mind game with us called “Guess what I am thinking?” Does God really have one plan, one path, and if we deviate from it, or choose the wrong one,

then we'll never be happy? Does following God's call mean a lot of agonizing over what it is God wants from us? I am not convinced this is true.

When God calls people, it is for their good, and the good of the world. God called Abram so that God could make a new start in the world. The flood had not worked. The Tower of Babel was a disaster. Now God chose to relate to the world through two individuals and their family. I will give you land, and descendants, God said. But this calling, these gifts, were not just for Abram and Sarai. They were blessed to be a blessing. They received this call and these promises from God in order to show the world what it meant to be in a relationship with God. They weren't called because they were so special or so talented, but because God wanted to bless the whole world through them.

And that's true for us too. God wants us to thrive, be happy, use our gifts productively, make a difference in the world. So God calls us ... and that's ALL of us, not just the clergy types ... to go, to follow, to do. God does this for us, and God does this for the world.

Still ... the call is not always so clear. We hear a lot of voices telling us what we should be doing, and it is not so easy to know what is our own voice and what is God's voice. And when answering one call means saying goodbye to something else, well, that's not easy either. Abram had to leave his home and family. The text does not say he grieved over that, but that doesn't mean it was easy.

I've wished for caller ID more than once over the last year. You have been so gracious to me, so affirming and encouraging. Stay and be our pastor, some of you have said. And it has been very tempting. I am very fond of you. You are very kind to me. We're a good fit. I've often thought it would be easier to stay here at Hope Church. But

I haven't been able to give up my other calling, to teach and to write. But I must confess that I am grieving the end of this relationship ...

As we all share in the process of sorting out how God calls us, two insights from the texts might be helpful.

First, who is calling? If it is God, then we can be sure that God has our best interests at heart. God is trustworthy. God wants us to thrive. God cares more about mercy than sacrifice.

Secondly, we are not ultimately called to guess the mind of God, or to discern the single path that will lead to happiness. We are called to participate in God's work. We are called to help bless the world. We are called to belong to God's family. Just like the tax collectors and sinners that Jesus brought in, we too are broken people who have been invited to dinner. Like the woman who wanted to tell Jeff Ja-PING-ga how much she appreciated his writing, God calls to tell us how much we are appreciated and valued and even needed.

The merciful God is calling us to be merciful. To welcome sinners. To realize that we are sinners ourselves. God is calling the church ... this congregation, the Reformed Church in America, the one holy catholic church, to be merciful as well. And here before us is a powerful example of God's invitation. Come, for all things are now ready. These are the gifts of God for the people of God. Amen.