Delivered in a Neat and Tidy Package

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Selections from Psalm 139, 1 Samuel 3, 1 Corinthians 6 and John 1.

Last week Rev. Joy Fisher preached about baptism. She said Martin Luther woke up each morning, put his finger to his forehead, and made the sign of the cross saying, “I am baptized” as a daily reminder that he was claimed by God. Joy asked us to make that sign and say those words, “I am baptized.” I’ve been doing it more than once a day ever since, finding comfort in remembering that I belong to God.

One reason Joy preached about Baptism is that January 7th was “Baptism of the Lord” Sunday. Joy read the Revised Common Lectionary scripture selection. That all sounds fancy and complex, but it’s really just a weekly reading assignment to move us through the whole Bible in three years. This guide is recognized by Presbyterians, Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalians, Lutherans, United Church of Christ, Methodists . . . by much of Christ’s church all over the world. It generally includes 4 scripture readings: from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a New Testament epistle (like one of Paul’s letters to Corinth), and a Gospel reading.

In this morning’s Call to Worship we read together today’s Psalm, number 139. And then for good measure, we sang many of those words again in Hymn 29. Listen again to these two verses:

*4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.*

When I was a child, my sister and I shared a room and each night after we crawled under the covers we would call out to our Dad to come and “tuck us in.” He would sit on our beds and tightly secure the sheets and blanket around our bodies. Then he’d kiss us goodnight. The feeling of being tucked in and kissed goodnight is shared by the Psalmist who says to God: “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” Psalm 139 was written many years ago, but it, like every word in the Bible, applies to our lives in some specific way. Psalm 139 says “God has us. God knows us intimately. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. God is with us to the end.”

After a challenging few weeks, I needed to hear that word, both through Joy’s sermon last week and again in today’s Revised Lectionary Reading. I likely would not have opened my Bible to Psalm 139 had this scripture not been this week’s selection.

The choices I make for myself tend to skew toward – of course! —what I want. I had a birthday this week and it was no mistake that I consumed a giant piece of coconut cake for my dinner that night. I also consumed a shocking number of additional slices of coconut cake since then. Because I love coconut. And I choose it every time, without fail, over all other treats. And the Good Lord knows I’m missing out by not looking beyond the coconut, beyond my favorite.

Moving beyond a favorite scripture is hard. The miracle of Jesus walking on water is moving and inspirational, but not all of God’s word is a “feel good” story. Yet all of God’s Word is essential to our discipleship.

God is reaching out to each of us, inviting us into intimacy, giving all of us God’s Word. God is calling to us. Hear how God called to Samuel in today’s 2nd Revised Common Lectionary reading.

*Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. Eli was lying down in his room; and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” and ran to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But Eli said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So, Samuel went and lay down. The Lord called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore, Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if God calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So, Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”*

Hmmm. God is calling Samuel and Samuel doesn’t even know to listen for God’s call. That is, until Eli says to open his ears and invite in the Word of God. We have heard this scripture now, and the clear message for us is to open our ears. A few minutes ago the choir sang to us, “Speak, O Lord” so now we’ve heard this message twice. In this New Year, when many of us are questioning our purpose in this world and making new resolutions, this is the scripture for us. Resolve to listen for God’s voice.

If you want to know whose you are, there Psalm 139. If you want to know from whom we should receive guidance, there are these words from Samuel. And now we turn to selections from our third scripture passage of the day, Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth. And be warned: this isn’t feel good. It’s tough to hear. It’s about abusing your body and sex without love. Brace yourselves.

*12 “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial. 13 “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food,” and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by God’s power. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! 16 Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with that prostitute? For it is said, “The two shall be one flesh.” 17 But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. 18 Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. {consoling} 19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body.*

Let’s recap. Psalm 139: I’m feeling good about myself, claimed by God and wonderfully made. 1st Samuel: I will listen to God’s call to me and I will pray beginning with the words, “Speak, O Lord.” And now Paul says: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you?”

(I would like to respectfully withdraw my earlier disclosure about the slices of coconut cake.)

Try this with me. I think I did this to my mother when I was little. I know my toddler daughter did it to me years ago. Put your hands over your ears and say, “La la la la la la.” What did you hear? Or more importantly, who did you hear? I heard only the sound of my own voice. Nothing else.

“Confirmation Bias” is a psychological term. It happens “when people filter out potentially useful facts and opinions that don’t coincide with their preconceived notions. It affects perceptions and decision making in all aspects of our lives and can cause us to make less-than-optimal choices.”

In other words, I’m right and I’m going to listen to others who confirm my opinion. I’m starting with MY word and only seeking out other words that confirm that I am right.

This is why I cannot be trusted to regularly choose God’s Word for me. If I’m being honest, I’d read Psalm 139 a thousand times before making my way to 1st Corinthians 6. Paul’s instruction to “glorify God in your body” is, indeed, God’s Word to me. And you. To all of us. And to each of us. This word is carnal. It has flesh on it. To some it says plainly, “Stop abusing the bodies of other people.” To others it says, “Just because something is legal doesn’t make it right.” Or, “Don’t use sex for power.” It may mean, “Let everything that you put into this body, this gift from God, honor your Creator.” That last one hits close to home, every single day.

If God hems me in and knows me, if God is calling to me and I know to listen, and if God delivers this message through Paul’s letter to the Corinthians well, this is the Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God?* I don’t want to hear that. Pass the coconut cake. It’s not illegal to eat 6 slices of coconut cake. Or whatever it is each of us is doing to ourselves—to our flesh covered, embodied selves-- that does not bring honor to our Creator.

And now on to excerpts of our Gospel message for the day.

*43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” 46 Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”*

[Do you hear Nathanael seeking confirmation of his bias? He wants to hear, “Nathanael, your opinion is right! Nothing good comes out of Nazareth!” But instead, Philip will have none of it. Rather than being a “yes man,” he stands up to Nathanael.]

*46 Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” 48 Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”*

[Do you hear echoes of Psalm 139? Jesus, God incarnate, already knows Nathanael-- intimately.]

*49 Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” 50 Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” 51 And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”*

To sum up this morning’s scripture: we are claimed, we are known, God calls to us, we are challenged to listen and do what is right and holy, and we will see heaven opened.

In these very pews this morning are people who treat their bodies well and people who are hurting themselves in some big or small way every day. There are abusers who have quit drinking and drugs and abusers who don’t know they need to stop. There are people who wake up loathing themselves, and people who embrace that they are wondrously made. There are people in these pews who haven’t heard God’s voice in years and others who heard God clear as a bell as the choir sang, “Speak, O Lord.” There are people here who dread tomorrow and others who trust that soon heaven will open for them and they will see angels.

This morning, know you are claimed and known, listen for God’s call to you, accept the challenge to do what is right and holy, and trust you are called to see angels. This is not your own word, confirmed by likeminded people. This is not my word to you. This is God’s Word to you. This is the Revised Common Lectionary selection for today, delivered in a neat and tidy package. If you choose to go beyond your own word and your likeminded friends’ words, and go to God’s word—if you choose to open this neat and tidy package of affirmation and challenge, of love and law, well . . . “*Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”*

And maybe when heaven opens we’ll see carrot cake. It has some coconut in it, but contains a lot of other flavors, too.

Amen.