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Date: October 25, 2020
Sermon: "Who Do You Think You Are?"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Scripture Reading

Deacon: Jeremiah, I've appointed you as a prophet to the nations.

People: Ah, God, not me! I'm too young!

Deacon: Don't tell me that! You are to go everywhere I send you and say whatever I tell you! Jonah, go preach against the great city of Nineveh because of their wickedness.

People: No, absolutely not, I'll run away as far as I can.

Deacon: Then a big fish swallowed you, and you had a change of heart, and the fish vomited you up on land, and off you went to Nineveh! Yeah! Moses, go to Pharaoh, and tell him, "Let my people go!"

People: No, not me! Who am I? I'm a nobody. Plus I'm a lousy public speaker. O God, please send someone else to do it.

Deacon: What about your brother? Take him with you and I will help you both. God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary. Gabriel said, "Hail Mary, the Lord is with you. Don't be afraid. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and will give birth to a son, who will be the child of God."

People: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be as you have said."

Forgive a generalization, but the Bible is filled with two kinds of people: people who say, "no" to God. And people who say, "yes." God calls us in lots of different ways. It can be a voice, a vision, a nudge, an angel, a hint, an idea, an opportunity dropped in your lap. Believers see that as God's getting in touch with us, giving us an opportunity. Nonbelievers see that as a coincidence, blind

luck, paranoia. But even among believers, there are still those two kinds of people: people who say, "yes" to God. People who say, "nope."

In fact, as we've just heard in that Scripture rendering for today, some of the most famous people in the Bible started out saying, "Nope!" God said to Moses, "I need you to go back to Egypt, talk to Pharaoh, and tell him to free the slaves." And Moses said, "No, thank you." God said to Jonah, "I need you to go to ancient Iraq, to Nineveh, and tell them to shape up." And Jonah said, "No way, I'm going the opposite way." God said to Jeremiah, "I need you to be my messenger, to represent me before the people." And Jeremiah told God, "Nope, I'm too young." Even Jesus, he actually had people seek him out, people who wanted to follow him, be his disciples, but "Not right now," said one, "I have urgent business to take care of." "Not just yet," said another, "I have too many family-related responsibilities; maybe later."

Fortunately, there are many who said "yes," courageously, faithfully, often not knowing exactly what they were being asked to do or where to go! God said to Abraham, "Get moving," and Abraham got up and went. God said to Isaiah, "Go to the people and tell them what they don't want to hear." And Isaiah responded, "Here am I, send me." And there is that wonderful story of Jesus's mother, Mary, a young person at the time, when God intervenes and literally takes over her life in ways beyond comprehension. She's asked to do what she can't even imagine, and her faithful answer, echoed by the Beatles: Let it be, let it be."

I've been thinking about this because the last month I've been editing the daily devotions written by our Church members, 50 people; plus another 50 people who responded to a personal request for their thoughts on some tough topics. That's 100 people who have allowed me into their hearts, their souls, their faith.

And next week, when we start sending out the daily devotions, you'll see how spiritually profound, how personally courageous, how Biblically deep these writings are. Their thoughts, representative of your thoughts, their ideas, your ideas are powerful. This gives me great hope for the future. And by "future," I mean like 10 days from now, from November 4th on.

For many years I was president of Habitat for Humanity, often crisscrossing the country for meetings and speeches. I was also Pastor of a Baptist Church at the time and had been hired with the understanding that I would be on the road a lot. One day, the Head Deacon came to me with a complaint: "Who will pray for us when you're away? What if somebody's sick and needs a prayer?" It was a sad conversation, frankly. Here was this historic Baptist Church (and Baptists pride themselves on strong laypeople), and they had no idea who could pray except me, the ordained clergy, the man in the pulpit.

I contrast that with my uncle who was a Baptist pastor up in Middlebury, Vermont, for 30 or more years. And all that time, he went away on mission trips and conferences, he may have been sick once or twice, but he never had to bring in an outside preacher. Instead, he turned the Church over to a Church member, just an ordinary person in the pews, a layperson, and all of a sudden, they're up in the pulpit, leading worship, preaching . . . and, yes, even praying! My uncle's Church and our Church, peopled with folks in finance, business; carpenters, nurses, teachers, accountants; CEOs and retail and mechanics: all of you able to represent God. Effectively. I already know that!

The point of this sermon is fairly simple. God, my uncle, and our Advent Devotional all operate on the same premise: you can do it. You are up to it. Your wisdom counts. Your faith counts. Your spiritual journey and lessons and insights count. Don't be shy.

There's an election in a week, perhaps you've heard about it! More accurately, there are thousands of elections, everything from dogcatcher to President. Lots of elections. Which means, Wednesday morning, November 4th, there are going to be a lot who came up short. Men and women who poured themselves into a campaign, who really believed in their own ideas, who gave it their best. And all over America, half of them will not win.

One of the pressing questions this year, more than most, is what will those who lost do? What will their followers do? America has always prided itself on the "peaceful transfer of power." One administration passes the baton to the next, nicely, helpfully, collaboratively. No tanks in the streets. No coup. No threats. Sure, there's disappointment, bitterness, complaints, whining. That's the nature of every competition. But no violence. No "monkey business."

All I know for sure—and you do too—is once the results are known, there will be a rush to set the tone. Everyone within the sound of my voice can easily name 10 people who want to set the tone: pundits, politicians, media, celebrities. The word "influencers" is a pop term now, and I like it. It's accurate. There are people who want to "influence" you in every way. It's mostly used for business and pop-culture. Someone with a large following on Instagram or Facebook posts a picture of themselves wearing certain clothes, eating at a particular restaurant, using a favorite perfume, and because you "like" them or "follow" them, they "influence" your taste, your choice. That's fine and fun. Likewise, people vie to influence your opinions, your thoughts, even your behavior.

The post-election question is who is going to push the hardest to influence the tone from our little town to your workplaces to right across America? Who will be the voices of calm . . . of rebellion . . . of hope . . . of fear . . . of unity . . . of disruption . . . of reason?

We know on the macro scale who that will be, who will be on cable news, on the front page, loud and clear. But my interest is you. How will you set the tone? How will you be an “influencer”?

You know exactly how it’s going to go. The day after the election, the days, even weeks after, in person, at work, around the golf course with friends, and, God help us—but you know I’m right—at the Thanksgiving table. People are going to say things and ask things. That puts it all square in your lap: good, bad, or ugly. Horrible things will be said about the winner. Worse things will be said about the one who didn’t win. You’ll have 10 seconds, maybe less, to do your part to set the tone. You can match outrage with outrage, you can swap insults and conspiracy theories, you can take their mockery and add your umbrage, you can out-sneer one another, out-swear, out-crazy one another, or you can be the people I know you to be.

My sermon is organized the way it is to give you the confidence to set the tone, to be a real influencer. First, I front-loaded the sermon with examples from the Bible. Men, women, even youngsters being called by God to speak up, make a difference, change the tone. Some were hesitant. Some were afraid. Some saw the danger. Some had no idea what they were heading into. And yet, when push came to shove, they stood by God’s side in word and deed. They could have stood with the crowd, gone with the flow, stuck their heads in the sand. Some even thought about it, or tried. But they all had what we used to call a “come-to-Jesus moment.” That’s the moment you decide *what* you stand for, *whom* you stand with, and *how* you’re going to show it. When the post-election verbal squabbles heat up, where will Christ be in your words? Where will your faith prove itself?

Then, after those Biblical examples, I told you about the 100 writers from our little Church family whose Advent devotions for you, whose personal reflections for me, showed an extraordinary depth of faith, of compassion, of understanding, *and* of humility. I’m emphasizing that, shouting that, preaching that to empower you to step up, be bold. I trust you to set the tone. I want you to be an influence in your circle.

Words, and how we use words are important. There are two little-known verses of the Bible that emphasize this. First, Jesus reserves his harshest condemnation for a person who uses words as insults. He says, “Anyone who calls someone ‘a fool’ is dangerously close to hell.” (Matthew 5:22) In other words, your mouth displeases God more than any other part of your body. Couple that with St. James, who couldn’t be clearer: “The tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. The tongue is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. The tongue disrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” (James 3: 6-8) James is telling us that the stuff we say

that hurts comes straight from hell. And that's what's going to be on full display in a few days. Tongues wagging. Words flying. Insults, curses, lies; words shouted, whispered, written, sent.

I'm asking you what you'll be up to with your words. What I'm really saying is I trust you! I trust you to use your words to set the tone, to influence.

I'm not suggesting that you alone or we collectively can change the tone of the world. But I absolutely believe you can change the tone of a workplace, of a team, of a neighborhood, maybe even a friendship and, by golly, of your Thanksgiving table.

Raise the bar of common decency. Raise the standard of civil discourse. Raise your voice in defense of values and virtues that do *not*, as St. James warned, "set the whole course of life on fire."

You have been in the presence of someone who is good, who is calming, who is healing and reconciling and serene. Now I'm asking you to be that someone, that presence, that spirit of Christ who stood in the middle of a storm and said, "No more. That's enough. Be still."