

“Listen for the Word of God”

1 Samuel 3:1-20

When I looked at the texts for today, I was somewhat torn. I love that story in the Gospel about the calling of Philip and Nathaniel, especially the part about Nathaniel sitting under a fig tree. I myself have never sat under a fig tree, but it sounds like a pleasant pastime. On the other hand, the Old Testament or Hebrew Scripture lesson for today is about the young boy Samuel hearing God calling to him and not recognizing that it was God's voice he heard. Another wonderful text! Which one to preach on? I have to confess that what put it over the top for me this time around was our new grandson, just four weeks old yesterday, Samuel David. Had our daughter and son-in-law named him Nathaniel, let's say, you might have heard a different sermon this morning than the one I am about to give.

The truth is, I have always loved this text. If you don't remember the story, Samuel was a young boy who had been brought to aging priest Eli by his mother Hannah, who had promised God that if God would grant her a son, she would dedicate him to God's service. The text says that God answered her prayer. She gave birth not only to Samuel but to three more sons and two daughters. And after Samuel was weaned, Hannah fulfilled her part of the bargain bringing him to the temple and presenting him to Eli to serve him in the temple.

And then we have this story that was read earlier. Samuel is still a young boy. Eli is now aged. They have gone to bed for the night in their respective rooms. The temple was dark, the way I imagine it, and very quiet. No forced-air furnace to kick on now and then, no whir of electronic equipment, no ticking of a wall clock, nothing to disturb the silence where the young boy Samuel was trying to sleep that night.

In some ways that kind of quiet can be a little unnerving if you are not used to it. When I finished seminary and we went to our first church we moved from an apartment on a busy road in a community north of Boston where we had learned to let the noise of traffic lull us to sleep, to a quiet side street of a sleepy little town in rural Indiana. And when we went to bed that first night it was so quiet we had trouble falling asleep. Your mind can play tricks on you when it is that quiet. The tiniest noise has your full attention. One of my favorite preachers, the Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, says: "In a world of too many words, silence affects people who are no longer affected by sound. Plenty of us who are defended against sound have no defense against silence." (*When God Is Silent*, p. 31)

As Samuel was falling asleep that night in the silence he thought he heard something, a voice, coming from where there should not be any voices. "Samuel, Samuel," the voice called. So he did what any child does when there are strange noises in the night, he headed for his parents' room, or in this case, his proxy parent, the priest Eli. "Here I am, for you called me," Samuel said, hoping desperately that it was Eli whose voice he had heard. But Eli replied, "I did not call; lie down again."

Samuel went back to bed and as he lay there in the stillness he heard it again: "Samuel, Samuel." This time he made it to Eli's room in about half the time. "Here I am, for you called me." "I did not call; lie down again."

When Samuel went back this time he kept his robe and slippers on and didn't really lie down, but sat on the bed, huddled in the corner by the wall. Again the voice came out of the darkness: "Samuel, Samuel." And this time when he went to Eli, the old priest concluded that there was more to this than an overly nervous child. He told Samuel to go and lie down, and if

he heard the voice again to say: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

So Samuel did as he was told, and when he heard his name called for the fourth time he answered as he had been instructed, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." What God had to say, as it turned out, was intended for Eli, but it was transmitted through the boy Samuel. But it's not the message that Samuel heard that night that I wanted to talk about. Rather, it is the process of listening and hearing.

Do we hear from God? Does God speak to us? There is a very interesting little comment, almost an aside, in the text where the writer, before telling this story, says this: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not wide spread." Anyone who listens to preachers on the radio (and I confess, I don't – if I happen to land on one while looking for music, Diane says that I switch off it in a nanosecond) would probably conclude that the word of the Lord is not rare at all in our day. They are always saying things like: "God says..." God says this, and God says that. How they know what God says is a mystery to me.

I know what the Bible says. The Bible says all sorts of interesting and sometimes scary things. The Bible says, for example, that if you have a "stubborn and rebellious son" who will not obey you, you should take him to the elders of the town and explain the situation and that the elders will solve the problem for you by stoning him to death. (Deut. 21:18-21) Now I know that we all have times when that might sound tempting. But we don't do that any more. The Bible says that women should keep silent in the church. (1 Timothy 2:11-12) Is that the same as God saying that? And if so, why isn't it working? The Bible says, "Slaves, be obedient to your masters," (Ephesians 6:5-8) a favorite text of southern slave holders before the Civil War. I feel certain that in many a sermon in the south ministers would say to their congregations, "God says that slaves should be obedient to their masters."

When a minister stands up in the pulpit and holds up a Bible and makes a statement prefaced with the words, "God says," in my mind that minister is leaving out several important steps of Biblical interpretation. That minister is leaving out the fact that the words being quoted from the Bible were not written by God. God never took pen to paper. That's not what the Bible is. Nor were the words of the Bible dictated verbatim in the ear of the writer. Nor did the clouds suddenly form into the shape of letters and words that could be copied.

The many different writers who wrote the various books of the Bible were writing their own words, and when we talk about the inspiration of the Bible and try to discern what that means, we always have to start there. The writers wrote with the mindset of a person living in a particular age and culture. When Biblical writers speak on subjects related to women or slaves, we have to take into account that in the world they lived in, women were considered inferior and slavery was accepted as the norm.

So at least for me, it is never appropriate to use the words, "God says," because I don't believe we ever know enough to say that. As you know, I preface the reading of the Gospel with the words: "Listen for the Word of God," rather than, "Listen to the Word of God." The preposition in that sentence is chosen deliberately. It is not, "listen to," but "listen for" the Word of God.

The Word of God is not a book. It is, as it says in the book of Hebrews, not something static, but something "living and active." The Word of God, as I understand it, is something that happens! It is an event! It is God speaking to us through the Scriptures, the holy texts. The Bible is, as our new officers affirmed last Sunday in the ordination and installation service, "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal," and God's word to

us. What all of that means is that the burden is put upon us, as listeners, to keep ourselves attuned to the Spirit, to perk up our inner spiritual ears, to “listen for the word of God.”

It is not the words read from the Bible alone, it is certainly not the words spoken from the pulpit alone, but it is God speaking, hopefully, through those words and through others, such as the words of hymns, the anthem, the liturgy.

So is the word of the Lord rare in our day, as we are told it was in Samuel’s day? Not by the standard of some who are quick to tell everyone what God says. But by another standard, maybe so. Or perhaps it is not so much that the word of the Lord is rare. God may be as talkative as ever, but perhaps the problem is more on our side, that we are not so good at listening. And that brings us back to the boy Samuel who was instructed to say, “Speak, Lord for your servant is listening.” That should be the prayer we offer each Sunday. And not only on Sunday, but each day.

Our world is so filled with noise, and our lives and our days are so crammed with words, expendable, intrusive, insistent, all seemingly demanding our attention. When do we ever have the time or the attention to give to the world of the Spirit? When can we ever calm and quiet ourselves enough to listen for the word of God? Even in prayer, many of us are much more likely to be speaking than listening. “Dear God,” we pray, “be with my cousin who ill, and help my neighbor who is having difficulty at work, and be with my kids (or parents), and help me with this job I have to complete,” and on and on. None of which is wrong or inappropriate. But is that all that prayer is? Is it our reciting certain words or phrases? Is it our taking a laundry list of requests to God, asking for things that we feel that we need or want?

Soren Kierkegaard once described the gradual evolution of his own prayers. “As my prayer became more attentive and inward I had less and less to say. I finally became completely silent. I started to listen—which is even further removed from speaking. I first thought that praying entailed speaking. I then learned that praying is hearing, not merely being silent. This is how it is, to pray does not mean to listen to oneself speaking. Prayer involves becoming silent, and being silent, and waiting until God is heard.” Prayer as listening instead of speaking. What a thought.

Of course listening involves our slowing down a little, being silent for a while, allowing a moment or two of stillness, turning aside at least temporarily from all that occupies us daily and being attentive to the matters of the soul. Not an easy thing to do in this age in which we live, filled as it is with almost constant noise and distractions from the moment we awaken until we close our eyes in sleep.

What if the next time we tried praying we were to not say a word? What if we just were silent, or if we did say something we said what Eli told the boy Samuel to say: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Maybe God is already aware of our cousin’s illness and our neighbor’s problems and our own as well, and maybe God is waiting for us to stop talking long enough to tell us something. Maybe we would hear something about what we might do to minister to our cousin or our neighbor. We might, in other words, be surprised, if we are quiet, to discover that God actually does still speak. And that may be the lesson that the young boy, Samuel, and the Senior Citizen, Eli, have to teach us.