

“Listening for Something New”

When pastors get together, we love to tell stories. After all, what is a sermon without a few good stories? So at a continuing education event last fall, several of us were gathered in the living area of the dorm one night, trying to “out story” the other.

One minister from the Chicago area told about the morning she was preaching a sermon entitled, “God is Calling You”. Right in the middle of the sermon, someone’s cell phone rang and the minister stopped what she was saying, pointed to the person and said, “That better be GOD!”

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if, when God wanted us to know something, God just called us on the phone? No need for burning bushes or doves from Heaven or even angels. No praying and then waiting and waiting for a sign, a clear sense of direction. Imagine! The phone rings, you pick it up and say, “Hello” and a deep, authoritative voice on the other end says, “Julie, about that decision you’ve been trying to make. Well, here’s what I have to say – just go for it! Do it! I’m with you all the way.”

Unfortunately, this is not how God has decided to communicate to us – at least not yet! Our Scripture lesson this morning is about a young priest in training who is awakened by a voice in the night. Samuel was truly a miracle baby. His mother Hannah, well beyond child bearing years, went to the Temple and prayed tearfully and faithfully about her barrenness. She promised God that if He would bless her with a son, she would return the child to Him and let him live a life time of service to the Lord. And that is exactly what came to pass.

So our story finds young Samuel sleeping in the Temple, near the Ark of the Covenant. He has been working as an apprentice if you will with the priest Eli. God has promised Eli that his family will always have authority in the Temple. However, Eli's sons have turned out to be less than desirable servants. The Bible actually calls them "scoundrels".

The passage we just heard says that "the lamp of God has not yet gone out". This is implying that a corrupt system had taken root in the Temple, that the light of God was dimming and soon, all would be lost for the people of God. But one little word offers hope. "Yet". And hope is what God extends to His people. Although He decides to revoke His promise to Eli, God also decides to use His newly chosen servant, Samuel, to lead the Temple.

This reminds us that God is present in our lives and can remove the old and corrupt and bring about something new and fresh. Samuel tells us that the Lord said to Him, "I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." This is the same thing that God promised through the prophet Isaiah to the people in Exile. "See, I can make all things new."

And what a great message of hope to us today as we have just begun a new year. This story opens with the voice of God absent and ends with a proclamation of His word. It begins with a corrupt and discredited leadership and ends with a new and vigorous prophet. So by this we know that, each day, when we rise, we can say to the Lord, "Please do something new with me today!" And trusting the wisdom of God, we know that God can make something new out of today, no matter how upright or corrupt we were yesterday. Every day is a new day with God.

Now at first, I had planned to read the entire story of Samuel's call. However, the Holy Spirit encouraged me to stop with these words: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening." Because this is the perfect time of year to really concentrate on listening to God. To have an epiphany!

On the Christian calendar, Epiphany is the day when we recognize that the Magi came to see the baby Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem. Their discovery made the Good News of the Word made flesh made available to the Gentiles. But the word epiphany means a sudden, intuitive perception of insight. It means the discovery or revelation of something. And in the new year, how powerful to think that if we just listen, the ears of each of us will tingle. That God will speak to each servant who is listening! That God is calling everyone here to do or be something specific in God's kingdom.

This is the hope that Samuel's encounter can give us for our own epiphanies! And all we have to do is listen. But of course, there are some qualifiers. First we need to think about what we are listening for. The world is full of noise. Televisions, radios, podcasts, books on tape. Compliments, criticism. Traffic and construction and teachers and preachers. Bad news, good news and fake news. So WHAT do we need to be listening for?

A country boy went to visit a friend in New York City. It was about noon and they were downtown by Times Square in Manhattan. The streets were filled with people. Cars were honking their horns, sirens were wailing and the sounds of the city were almost deafening. The country boy said, "I hear a cricket." His friend said, "You have got to be kidding. You couldn't possibly hear a cricket with all this noise." The country boy listened again and said, "Yes I'm sure of it. I hear a cricket."

The two boys listened very carefully for a moment and then the country boy walked across the street to a big cement planter where some bushes were growing. He looked into the bushes and sure enough there was a cricket there. “That’s incredible,” said the city boy. “You must have super-human ears.” “No.” said the country boy. “My ears are no different than yours. It all depends on what you are listening for.” Samuel’s story makes us all stop and ask ourselves, “What are you listening for today?”

Of course, this leads to an even more relevant question. *Who* are you listening to? Samuel was not expecting to be called by God. The Bible has told us that visions were not widespread so it would have been unusual. Also, Eli has been told that his sons will be his successors and I am sure this has been made known to Samuel. On top of that, we are also told that Samuel did not yet know the Lord. He did not have an intimate relationship with God so he would never have expected to hear from Yahweh.

Assuming that it was his earthly master calling him, Samuel got up from his mat in the temple and went to Eli only to discover each time that he had not been summonsed. Finally, he understands that God is REALLY calling him, Samuel, a mere boy. But the discovery comes only after Eli encourages Samuel to open his mind up to this possibility.

Friends, this is Good News. God is calling each of us. You may think that you not worthy of God speaking to you and the that is true! None of us are worthy. But God is a God of grace and calls us anyway. So each of us, like Samuel, needs to open our minds to the truth of what God will say to us.

In Samuel’s story we are told that human sinfulness has caused God to revoke his promise to Eli. Yet His grace will not allow him to leave the people of Israel alone. Rather he extends a different promise – one to make things new. But we must be

listening to God to discover how God can make light out of darkness, something out of nothing, newness out of that which *we* think needs to be discarded or buried.

And above all, Samuel's story is calling us to listen for something new. I heard a story about FDR that when he was president he got tired of saying the usual things all the time at those White House receptions. So one evening he decided to find out if anybody was paying any attention to what he was saying by saying something new. As each person came up to him and shook his hand he would smile and say, "I murdered my grandmother this morning."

Person after person greeted him and would respond with, "How lovely." or "That's nice." FDR realized that no one was listening to him. Finally a foreign diplomat shook his hand. FDR said, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The diplomat looked a little shocked but leaned in to the president and said softly, "I'm sure she had it coming to her."

Samuel's story is such a powerful one as we begin the new year because it reminds us that God can take all the muck and mire of yesterday and make something new, if only we will listen. Even in the bleakest moments, even on our most stubborn days, even when we feel the least deserving, God has a plan and God will call upon the person with the qualifications best suited to the situation at hand.

God is going to do something new for each of us today. It may be a call to something specific like working at the Carpenter's Table even though you never have before. It may be something very personal, like a call to forgive someone or yourself as you begin the new year – to leave those hurts in the past. It may be a call to speak out against injustice or to be more compassionate. It may be a call to expect more or to fight

harder. And simply by the fact that each of us in this room is a child created in God's image, we know that we can expect a call from God if only we will listen.

And it is important to realize that God often calls into service those whom society would consider completely unacceptable. God chose a murderer to lead His children out of bondage in Egypt. He chose a young, inexperienced shepherd boy to be the king of His people. He chose an unmarried maiden to be the earthly mother of His son. And he chose a pompous Pharisee and persecutor of Jesus' followers to establish His church in the first century.

Friends, God uses who GOD chooses. And if you don't believe all these Biblical examples, then just talk to someone that I went to college with and watch them die laughing when they hear I am a Presbyterian Minister now!

I am not one who reads the comic – I have been told it is a character defect. But sometimes friends will cut one out for me, especially when it has to do with church. Someone once gave me a clipping from Family Circus that showed the children coming out of church, dressed in their Sunday best with bulletins in hand. The oldest daughter exclaimed, "I like it best when the preacher says, "And Finally."

So here is my – "AND FINALLY". Perhaps the best news from the call in the night that Samuel received from God is this – God knows our shortcomings and offers forgiveness exactly when and how it is needed. God knew that Eli was aging and new leadership needed to be called into service before it was too late. God did not wait for Samuel to come to know him – HE ACTED RIGHT THEN. He extended his call despite the fact the Samuel did not have a relationship with Him yet and offered forgiveness to the House of Eli when it was critical.

As we go about our daily routines and begin working our way through another year, the call of Samuel serves to remind us that God may unexpectedly call YOU AND ME to perform feats that we might well believe are beyond our abilities. But this story also reminds us that God will provide us with the help we need to fulfill His call. And it reminds us that even though God does the calling, WE have the responsibility as believers, to answer His call.

We are called to ask probing questions. To be willing to give up our presuppositions. To truly determine what God's providence for each of us is. You see the focus on the story is not on the ending of Eli's reign but on the new beginning of Samuel's work. It is a story of a new social era for the nation of Israel. It is a story of grace and forgiveness that extends to all of us because we believe in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. It is a story of new beginnings.

Walter Brueggemann writes about this passage, "This is a story of how an old man can embrace relinquishment, a surprised mother can sing a song, the ears of the conventional can tingle and life begins anew." So if any one of us receives the call, if our ears are tingling, if an unexpected message of forgiveness is offered, may we be ready to answer. Because it just might be God. Amen.

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