

For the 2nd Sunday After the Epiphany; 17 Jan 2021

1st Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20); 1st Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

There is a lot of listening is going on – when you read all of those Bible texts that were read for today. There is confusion in the listening (1st Samuel) – there are wrong voices listened to (1st Corinthians) – and there is reluctant listening (John).

Listening to the voice of God. Finding direction and meaning for life – knowing with confidence what to do and what not to do. Listening in such a way that you are able to be aware that God is with you – an active part of your life.

I know that you want to somehow listen to God. Or at least that is one assumption (dangerous as that word is) I have about people who come to church. You want to listen to God and act upon what is said to you.

You don't want to just hear words, or get a feeling, but also want to respond with openness. But sometimes – maybe most of the time – you aren't sure of what to do. How do you decide which of all those voices around you to listen to? How do you know who to listen to?

That was what was going on in Corinth, among the believers who received this letter Paul wrote. They had learned from Paul the important lesson – that because of Jesus, we are saved by God's grace. They also had heard that we are saved for service to God and others.

One group of people only heard part of that statement – the emphasis on God's grace. And so, they said, we can disregard any restrictions on our lives. Grace is approval – and God's blessing, and if that is really free, it means we can throw out the restrictions

- On overeating
- On sexual behavior
- On any behavior at all

They concluded that God forgives – and so no one should say there is wrong and right things to do. Since God forgives, God certainly doesn't say that there are wrong behaviors.

They had heard – but they didn't really listen. They missed the statement that THEREFOR they were to glorify God with the whole self. They disregarded the body as an important part of that.

What they were doing is called selective listening. My wife tells me I do that sometimes. I guess I do 😊. She does it as well – we all do. Sometimes we even do it on purpose – like when you have the TV on as background noise – but aren't listening to it.

At other times selective listening is a little more frustrating – just ask a friend who has had to repeat something to you three times – and you still didn't catch it.

So – the first thing about listening for the voice of God is that we actually have to listen.

Secondly, to have an experience with God, you need to recognize when you hear His voice. Samuel didn't at first, nor did Eli.

Which brings us to the question, how do you recognize that voice!

- One person feels that the voice of God is leading them to a mission field – but there is no mission group willing to take them.
- Another believes God is calling them to take a certain job.

- The majority of people feel more like that opening line from the reading from Samuel today, “in those days the word of the Lord was rare” – they don’t have the slightest clue about the voice of God.

It took three times of Samuel going back and forth before Eli recognized that it was possible that God was speaking. Today, I think, if someone said that they physically heard the voice of God, they might be dragged to a psychiatric ward.

Having said that, I do know some who have believed they heard the voice of God – and they are perfectly sane. They have heard it not only in preaching, scripture and in conversations with other Christians – but also as a voice speaking to them.

To a lesser degree you might experience that as the voice of your conscience.

How do you recognize it as the voice or direction of God when it comes – including when it comes by other people speaking to you?

The first thing to ask is whether or not it tells you to do something that goes against that the Bible clearly says. Perhaps that is why those that I have known who have heard that voice – know the Bible well.

They can test whether or not it is true. You see – those voices – whether a preacher, or another person, or the voice of your conscience could be from yourself...from the devil ...or from God. One of the teachings Lutherans emphasize that many others don’t...our sources of temptation and false direction are the devil – who is real...the world...and our own sinful self.

Something objective needs to be a yardstick – a measure. Otherwise we deceive ourselves. Al Capone – the famous gangster...one of the founders of organized crime in the US – didn’t believe that he did anything wrong. He described himself as an unappreciated public benefactor.

In other words – he saw himself as someone who did good for other people. He had a clean conscience. That is what we all tend to do. We convince ourselves that no matter what we do...we are doing good, and so we need something objective to speak to us.

By that we can follow words of advice that were given by Paul to another group of Christians, “test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.” (1st Thessalonians 5:21-22).

How do you recognize the voice of God? I told you there is the objective – does it contradict scripture. But there is also the subjective – discernment. This also is a place where we need to find other Christians to help us – to pray with us – and to listen.

The voice of God speaks to something deep inside of us. The voice of God will lead you, it seems, to do things that you won’t do naturally on your own.

- It led the people of Corinth to examine the way they lived.
- It led Samuel to be a prophet – and say something he didn’t want to to his teacher Eli.
- It led Nathaniel to come to someone he considered a hick. At least that seems to be his judgment about anyone, like Jesus, who was from Nazareth.

But to each of them, something deep inside of them was being touched. So be open to being changed – because that is what God does to each of us.

Listening to the voice of God requires us to get away from distractions. Some find it hard to sit in silence....nut that is the best way. Because there are so many voices calling us.

It could be a retreat, or it could be simply being at home, in silence.

Yes, God can speak to us anywhere – the problem is that we have difficulty listening. We are overcome by the sounds that are around us – the TV, traffic sounds, music, and other people. So much so that we cannot listen.

A few years ago I went on a weekend retreat. Something called Via De Cristo. There are different forms of this same group – going under different names...Tres Dias...Walk to Emmaus...and Cursillo are among the names.

Though the weekend involves teaching, it begins with quiet. Silence, so you can prepare yourself to listen. About 3 hours when there are to be no conversations.

If you want to listen to God, try to find some time to be in quiet. It is surprising to discover how much time in quiet people like Martin Luther and Charles Wesley spent. For all their activity, they felt the need to do what Jesus did – go away to be in quiet occasionally.

There is one more problem to face about listening to the voice of God. Do you really want to hear God speak?

Think about the sons of Eli. They came to the temple regularly. They came because it was their business. They followed in doing what their father did.

They came because they were actually able to make a lot of money because of it. Unless you are leader of a very large church, that doesn't happen now. They came because it could be all about them – and it made a good cover for a party hardy life.

They didn't want to hear God speak. And when God did speak to them – through Samuel – they ignored what was said as well.

They had lost the vision of the privilege they had been given. They were able to go to a most sacred place. They were able to handle the covenant that God had made with people from Mount Sinai. And they began to treat that as if it were just another box.

They didn't look at what was written. They didn't retell the stories of what God had done before. They were only in it for what was in it for them.

That was why the word of God had become rare in that day. Those who were to lead God's people ignored what is sacred, or took it for granted.

There were those rare people who wanted to listen to God – but they had become rare. There were some – because God always makes sure that there are some faithful in the world.

We live in a very confusing world. You are challenged:

- Challenged to want to listen to God.
- Challenged to sort out all the voices to discover what is from God.
- Challenged by the noise of all that is around you.

But you are also especially blessed because you are not alone. The Spirit of God is there to guide you –

- Through others who point you to Jesus, like Nathaniel did for his brother.
- Through those places we know that we receive the Word of God – the Bible and God's word preached.

- Through the Spirit of God in you.

Because of that, may you...like Samuel say, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."