

LISTEN CAREFULLY -- GOD MAY BE SPEAKING TO YOU!

(11/09/11)

Scripture Lesson: 1Samuel 3:1-20

“Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’” (1 Samuel 3:10)

Every once in a while someone asks me where I get the ideas for my sermons. As you may know, the Revised Common Lectionary lists four readings for every Sunday. One is from the Old Testament; one is from a psalm; one is from an epistle of Paul or one of the other apostles to the early church; and the fourth is from a gospel. When I preach from the lectionary I usually choose the gospel lesson as the basis for my sermon. This is because I am more interested in Jesus, what Jesus said and did, than I am in the other parts of scripture.

When you preach from the lectionary, you read the four scripture selections early in the week to see if anything jumps out at you. Sometimes this happens, sometimes it doesn't. The four readings are supposed to be connected to each other in some way. Only rarely can I grasp the underlying connection, and when I do, it often isn't something that I feel like working into a sermon.

I don't mind preaching from the lectionary. I prefer, however, to just be open to what touches or moves me in a given week. It is a rare week when something doesn't happen that brings to mind a certain passage of scripture. It is a rare week when I do not find my parishioners, my students, or my counselees struggling with an existential issue that brings to mind one of Jesus' teachings. It is a rare week where I am not touched by something during worship that I would like to share with you the following Sunday.

This happened last week during worship. As you know, I am fairly busy during worship. I have a job to do. My job is to lead you in worship. My job is to help you deepen your relationship with God through Christ, to help you understand God, Jesus, and yourself more deeply. My job is to provide a setting, a context within which you might encounter or be encountered by the transcendent. To this end, I put a lot of thought into the worship service and especially into the sermon.

Since I am not only here on Sunday morning to lead you in your worship but also to worship myself, I would like something to happen to me as well. I try to go into each

worship service as open as I can be to the way or ways that God might speak to me in and through the service. This may happen during the reading of the scripture lesson or during our time of prayer. Most often, however, it happens to me through music: through the choral introit or anthem, and very often through the words of one of our hymns.

As you know, Bob L'Heureux usually picks the hymns. There are weeks when I suggest one or two hymns that I feel will go with my sermon. On most weeks, however, Bob reads the scripture lesson I give him, looks at the sermon title, and then picks hymns that touch on that theme. The vast majority of times his selection is absolutely inspired. I am amazed at his ability to find hymns that truly capture the essence of my message.

Unfortunately, there are times when this selection is coupled with an unfamiliar melody. When people say to me, "Where did you get that second hymn? No one has ever heard it before," I tell them not to blame me; Bob chose it. That probably isn't Christian, but it does take the heat off me.

Actually, I want to compliment our choir and this congregation. I have never been in a church where such a large percentage of the parishioners sing the hymns and say the words of the unison prayers. You do not sit in worship as spectators. I know some of the hymns require you to stretch, to step a little outside your comfort zone, but I am very glad that you do so. You may not be able to hear it from the back of the church, and certainly not in the choir loft, but down front here they sure sound good to me.

Last week I was struck by the third verse of our last hymn. The hymn, "We Would Be Building," is one of my favorite hymns. The third verse contains the line, "When to our ear there comes divine commands." Since last Sunday was the fourteenth anniversary of my call to this church, that particular line got me thinking about the matter of call. It also got me thinking about how God speaks to us. That reminded me of the scripture lesson from 1 Samuel that was read at Julie Cedrone's installation two weeks ago, the account of how Samuel discovered that God was speaking to him.

I seldom preach from 1 and 2 Samuel and we have never used them as the focus of our Sunday Bible study. They contain a lot of biblical history. The prophet Samuel was an important part of this history; it was he who anointed Saul and David as the first and second kings of Israel. The story of Samuel is also a story with many lessons for us. It is a powerful articulation of an unexpected and almost unrecognized call.

Around 1000 B.C., near the end of the era of the Judges and just before the period of the monarchy, a man named Elkanah lived in the little town of Ramah. Elkanah had two wives. Peninnah bore him several children; Hannah was unable to conceive. Just as Hagar had looked down on Sarah when Sarah was unable to bear children to Abraham, Peninnah ridiculed and tormented Hannah for her inadequacy as a woman.

In that time and culture, the inability to bear children was regarded as a curse. The 1st chapter of Samuel tells us “the Lord had closed Hannah’s womb.” Since having children was regarded as a woman’s primary meaning in life, Hannah felt disgraced.

Once every year Elkanah took his household to the nearby city of Shiloh to worship and offer sacrifice. Eli was the priest of the temple. Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas served as priests because their father was advanced in years. The RSV tells us that the sons of Eli were “worthless men.” The NRSV describes them as “scoundrels.” They had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people. They stole the best part of the sacrifices that were offered by the people at the temple.

There are many parts of this story that give us pause. It reminds us that ordained clergy throughout history have not always been faithful to their trust. Their ministry has often been more self-serving than it has been of service to their people and the Lord. Eli knows that his sons are betraying their trust. He rebukes them, but scripture tells us “they would not listen to the voice of their father.” Once again, it has always been thus.

The Lord passes judgment on Eli’s sons and curses Eli’s family line. There are several points in this narrative where God appears (by our standards) to be unjust. God curses Eli even though Eli is a good priest who serves as Samuel’s mentor. Eli is the one who makes Samuel aware that it is God who is speaking to him. It seems a little unfair to blame Eli for the sins of his sons, especially when Eli had rebuked them.

It is a little ironic that Samuel is the one who delivers the news of the judgment to Eli, that this is his first act as a prophet. Samuel’s sons later betray their trust in the exact same way that Eli’s sons did; instead of serving their people they seek personal gain. In 1 Samuel 8:1-3 we read,

When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.

But we are getting a little ahead of ourselves.

On one of their trips to Shiloh, Hannah, who is described as “bitter in her soul,” goes into the temple, prays to the Lord and weeps. Then she makes a vow:

O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head. (1 Sam. 1:11)

A nazirite is one who is set apart, separated, or consecrated for a special purpose, in this case to become a priest. It is interesting that in those days the priests wore their hair long and could drink neither wine nor scotch. Things were tough in those days.

Eli overhears Hannah’s vow. He tells her that he hopes the Lord will grant her petition. And so it happens. Scripture tells us that the Lord “remembered Hannah.” This implies that God at times has a memory problem. Hannah becomes pregnant and bears a son. She names him Samuel because, as she says, “I asked him of the Lord.”

When Samuel is old enough to be weaned, Hannah takes him to Shiloh and brings him to Eli the priest. Hannah says to Eli,

Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord. (1 Samuel 2:26-28)

Note that Hannah believes in the power of prayer. When God grants her petition, she offers the child to the Lord. She entrusts him to Eli that Eli might raise him to be a priest. Actually, in both the RSV and the NRSV we are told that Hannah “loaned” her child to the Lord. I guess a mother never really gives her child away, certainly not in marriage and not even when the child enters the priesthood.

I do think there is another lesson here. Hannah loves her child. When she brings the child to the temple, the child is still young. Hannah loves Samuel, but she does not try to hold onto him. She knows that children are a gift from God, and that ultimately they belong to God. She then prays a magnificent prayer of thanksgiving, not dissimilar in either style or content to the Magnificat, Mary’s song of praise, in Luke 1:46-55. The Lord responds to Hannah by giving her five more children: two sons and three daughters.

Samuel lives in the temple with Eli where he learns to “minister before the Lord.” Hannah visits Samuel every year. Every year she makes him a little robe and takes it with her when the family makes its annual pilgrimage to Shiloh. Scripture tells us “the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men.”

As we begin this morning’s lesson, we read that “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”

Perhaps Samuel’s time is not unlike our time. Many people in our time do not have a sense that God is speaking to them. With some of those who do, and who thus presume to speak for God, I have my doubts. This text also reminds us that in biblical times people believed that God speaks to us through our dreams. Dreams, in the words of the Jungian psychoanalyst John Sanford, are “God’s forgotten language.”

God speaks to us in many different ways. God speaks to us through the Bible, the church, the prophets, and through nature. God speaks to us in Jesus, the Word made flesh. God speaks to us and to our time through special people. But God also speaks to each of us as individuals through our dreams. In our dreams, as in our prayer, if we listen carefully we might hear that “still small voice” that calls us forth into life.

God speaks to Samuel in the dead of night – probably in a dream. He calls Samuel forth into his vocation as a prophet. Samuel hears, but he does not understand that it is God who is speaking to him. He thinks that the voice he hears is Eli’s.

Three times Samuel hears a voice calling his name. Three times he arises from his bed, goes to Eli and asks Eli what he wants. Three times Eli tells him that it was not he who called his name. He tells Samuel to go back to sleep. Finally Eli realizes what is happening. He tells Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” When Samuel does this, God speaks to him.

Why didn’t Samuel know that it was God who was speaking to him? Why don’t we know when God is speaking to us? It may be that we’re not listening. It may be that we are listening to the wrong things. It also may be that God is speaking to us but we don’t understand that it is actually God who is calling our name.

There is another passage in this story that I find interesting. Samuel is ministering to the Lord. He is working in the temple. He helps people with their offerings and

sacrifices. He performs religious rituals. Yet we are told in 1 Samuel 3:7, “Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.”

There is a lesson here. This passage tells us that it is possible for a clergyperson to be involved in ministry, to serve the church, and yet “not know the Lord.” It is possible for a layperson to be a part of a Christian church and “not know the Lord.” We can hold membership in a church. We can pledge and perhaps even tithe. We can attend worship, sing in the choir, serve on a board or committee, and help out with the coffee hours. We can do all this – and still not know the Lord.

If this is the case, if we have substituted church membership, church attendance, or church activities for a direct personal knowledge of the Lord, then we have missed the most important part. If we hold orthodox religious beliefs yet do not have a personal relationship with the Lord, we have missed the most important part. We are like Martha, who works hard but neglects what Jesus calls “the better part,” the part chosen by Mary.

If this is true of us, and I suspect it is true of most of us at least to some degree, then Samuel has something to teach us. Samuel would tell us that he was exactly where we are – active in the church, but not really knowing the Lord, not really hearing the word of the Lord when it is spoken to him. Samuel would tell us to listen. He would tell us to listen carefully.

Samuel at least places himself in a place where he is more apt to hear the voice of the Lord. He places himself in the temple. He actually sleeps in the temple. I am not recommending this – it gets cold here at night, especially in the winter. I am also not suggesting that you sleep through the worship service and certainly not the sermon in the hope that God might speak to you, as he did to Samuel, in a dream.

Samuel would probably tell us that if we do not attend worship, how could God speak to us through worship? If we never set time aside for prayer, how can God speak to us through prayer? If we never open ourselves to God, if we don’t even listen, how are we going to hear God’s voice?

Most of us are not good listeners. We need to listen more carefully to each other. We need to listen more carefully to ourselves. And we need to listen carefully that we might hear that still small voice, the voice that is calling our name, the voice that is calling us forth into new life.

Eli asks Samuel to tell him what the Lord had said. Because an angel had already come to Eli and had warned him, I suspect that Eli knew what God said to Samuel. But Eli wants Samuel to tell him the truth. He wants to hear what he really didn't want to hear.

We all want to hear God's voice when God is comforting us, when God is confirming us, when God is praising us. We do not always want to hear God's voice when God is judging us or challenging us. I think Eli had a lot of courage and a lot of integrity to want to hear the truth – even when the truth hurt.

When Samuel finally realizes that it is God who is speaking to him, he does not run away, as Jonah did. He asks God to speak to him once more, and he promises to listen. Prior to this encounter, this epiphany, Samuel was an active member of his church, but he did not really know the Lord. When Samuel opens himself to God, when he truly listens, his relationship with God moves from belief to deep personal experience. He discovers what it means to “know the Lord.”

Samuel would tell us that God spoke to people in biblical times, but that God is still speaking. He spoke to the prophets of old, and he speaks to us today. He speaks to us as a people and he speaks to each and every one of us as an individual. When we listen to what God is saying to us, we open ourselves to inner transformation, and we become more able to incarnate the kingdom of God in our little corner of the world.

Samuel would tell us that if we are to know the Lord, we have to begin by listening. He would tell us to listen very carefully. If we listen very carefully, if we listen not only through our ears but also through our heart, we might hear God's voice calling our name. We might hear God's voice calling us forth into fullness of life.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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