

“Speak Lord, I am listening.”

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1 Samuel 3

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Galileo once said, “See now the power of truth; the same experiment which at first glance seemed to show one thing, when more carefully examined, assures us of the contrary.” And “Who would set a limit to the mind of man? Who would dare assert that we know all there is to be known?” Both quotes remind us that none of us have the full perspective or truth; that we need each other to continue to challenge us to fuller understanding and comprehension of the future. Galileo was born in the middle of the 16th century in Florence, Italy and studied at the University of Pisa. He became known and referred to as the father of observational astronomy, father of modern physics and scientific method, and father of modern science. Galileo championed the notion of heliocentrism – a belief that the sun is the center of our universe and not, as previously believed, the earth. His proposition drew opposition from established institutions, including the Catholic Church. In fact, his new observation, based on scientific fact, initiated an investigation by the church which called heliocentrism a “foolish and absurd philosophy, and formally heretical since it explicitly contradicts the sense of Holy Scripture.” Galileo was tried by the Inquisition and found guilty of heresy. He would live out the remainder of his life under house arrest, when he died at age 77.

Galileo’s writings and discoveries were, for the most part, forgotten until the early half of the 20th century when Pope Pius XII described Galileo as the “most audacious heroes of research...not afraid of the stumbling blocks and the risks” involved

with the sharing of his research. In 1992 Pope John Paul II acknowledged that the Church had erred in condemning Galileo for asserting that the Earth revolved around the Sun instead of vice versa. Galileo lived during a time of great transition. What was believed to be the truth concerning the place of the earth in our universe, was being challenged. Too often, isn't it true, we believe with absolute certainty that the universe revolves around us (the earth) instead of the sun (or God's world). A seismic shift in paradigms was occurring in Galileo's lifetime. We are living through seismic shifts. Let's listen to what scripture does, in fact, say to us. The Word of God as it comes to us from the Old Testament in 1 Samuel.

A little background:

As the story of 1 Samuel begins, the people of God are at a pivotal moment in time in biblical history. The people of Israel have governed themselves through a loosely organized tribal confederacy, being led by charismatic judges. This particular government is falling apart. At the end of the Book of Judges we are told: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." Not considering what God would have them to do. So, a new thing is about to happen. A paradigm shift is about to occur: a shift akin to the shift which occurred when Galileo suggested that the sun, and not the earth, was the center of the universe. The people of Israel will be defeated at the hands of the Philistines and the Ark of the Covenant will be captured and carried away and the people will cry for a king to rule them. As this shift is occurring in the political, social and religious life of a people, a young Israelite woman is asking God to bless her with the gift of a child. She has been unable to conceive for

many years and if God will grant her this one blessings, she will dedicate her child to the work of the Temple.

God hears Hannah's prayer, choosing to respond to her anguished cry and the Israelites' need for a strong religious leader. Hannah conceives and gives birth to her first born son. And she names him Samuel. Once the young Samuel is weaned, Hannah remembers her promise to God and presents the boy Samuel to Eli, the Temple guardian, to be trained as a priest. Today's scripture reading is an account of Samuel's boyhood training under the direction of Eli.

Hear now the word of God.

Prayer for Understanding: Fulfill the scriptures in our midst, Lord God. Send your Holy Spirit to open our ears, enlighten our eyes, and loosen our tongues in praise and thanksgiving. Grant us the courage to respond when you call our name. Amen.

Read 1 Samuel 3

During the days of Samuel's training, scripture tells us that "the word of the Lord was rare." Apparently, in the mind of the writer, God's silence represents something historically unique. In ordinary times, the writer seems to imply, God speaks. God is a talker. "In the beginning," we read in Genesis, "God created the heavens and the earth." And then God speaks and things begin to happen. Throughout the ages the Bible portrays God as speaking to patriarchs and matriarchs, to the lawgivers and judges and prophets. When finally, in a divine burst of revelation, God pours saving grace out on humanity in the person of Jesus Christ, the "word became flesh and dwelt among us."

God is a talker. So why do we read in this morning's scripture lesson of God's silence? "In those days the word of the Lord was rare...."

Could it be that the Israelites, even you and I today, are so busy talking ourselves that we cannot hear God's speech to us?

Jed Harris, producer of "Our Town" and other plays, became convinced that he was losing his hearing. He went to a specialist, who gave him a thorough check up. The doctor pulled off his wrist watch and asked, "Can you hear this ticking?" Harris said, "Of course. The specialist walked to the door and held up the watch again. "Now can you hear it?" Harris concentrated and said, "Yes, I can hear it clearly." The doctor walked out the door into the next room and said, "Can you hear it now?" Harris said, "Yes." The doctor said, "Mr. Harris, there is nothing wrong with your hearing. You just don't listen."

The church of Samuel's day is not listening to God so in our story this morning it is the young Samuel who hears God's voice calling to him in the middle of the night.

The opening lines of the story possess an almost comic quality: Samuel springs from bed again and again in response to a voice he hears in the night. Only Samuel mistakes the voice for Eli's and running to respond, he awakens his mentor, who grumpily sends him back to bed. But these lines are tragic also. For they tell the story of a young man who grew up in the very womb of the Temple and never (before this) heard the voice of God. Apparently, there is more to knowing God than being in church. Even worse, nobody ever taught him to even expect the voice of God in church and in the company of the faithful. When the voice comes, gently calling to Samuel in the middle of the night, it comes as a complete and mysterious surprise.

Do we expect to hear God speak to us in our own time? Are we teaching our children how to listen for God's voice? If we are tempted to say that the word of the Lord is rare in our day, I believe that we need to question whether we are truly listening to God, the God of the Bible, who is a talker.

But when we hear God speaking to us, how will we know whether it is the word of God? I read an article in Christianity Today which described our understanding of call to ministry. Call to ministry always occurs in the context of the community of faith. In the article, this writer shares a story. A young farmer was standing in his field, observing a particular cloud formation. The clouds formed the letters G,P, and C, and he believes them to be a call from God: Go preach Christ! The farmer rushes to the deacons of his church and insists that he has been called to preach. Respectful of his ardor, they invite him to fill the pulpit. That Sunday the sermon is long, tedious, virtually incoherent. When it finally ends, the leaders sit in stunned silence. Finally, a wizened deacon mutters to the would-be preacher: Seems to me the clouds were saying "Go plant corn."

At this point in the story, the role of Eli snaps sharply into focus. I like Eli. He seems like a kindly older gentleman, weighed down by the failures of his sons and a little slow on the uptake, but he offers the young Samuel sound counsel. Up until this point in the biblical narrative Eli has served as a symbol of all that can go wrong with the church, because of the corruption of his sons: their complacency, their self-serving ambition, their oppression of God's people; and their downright laziness and demand for entitlement. Now, however, Eli stands tall and delivers the absolutely crucial service entrusted to him by God. He names the voice that Samuel hears as the voice of God.

After Samuel's third visit to Eli in the night, Eli perceives that what Samuel hears is the voice of God. Instead of cuffing the boy, Eli rubs the sleep from his eyes and instructs Samuel, upon hearing God's voice again, to respond, "Here I am Lord, your servant is listening." The young Samuel needed someone to teach him to listen to God's voice and how, upon hearing it, how to respond.

There is an essential transference of leadership going on in this story – from one generation to another. The next generation hears the voice of God; and it is the present generation of leadership who may no longer hear the voice of God but discerns God's call in our children. Samuel must rely on the wisdom of Eli and Eli must be open to the possibility that the Lord is speaking a new word, ushering in a new age.

And there is no guess work about the message God communicates to Samuel. God demands of Samuel that he speak a critical word of truth to Eli. Eli's sons believed they were entitled to inherit leadership in the Temple. But because of their corruptness, the Lord has now chosen Samuel to replace Eli and his sons. In other words, don't be seduced into believing that just because God has called to you once that this is a privileged position. God speaks to whom God chooses and there are consequences for misplaced pride, arrogance or abuse of power. This word of truth and judgment must have been extremely difficult for Samuel to speak – to Eli, his mentor, the one who was older and wiser and in a position of authority. And Eli is now listening and acknowledges the truth of what Samuel says to him. Samuel becomes the teacher and Eli the learner – their roles are reversed!

There is today in the art world an unresolved dispute as to how many actual paintings of Rembrandt exist. Of all the purported Rembrandts, critics disagree as to

which ones were done by the master himself. A major part of the problem is the way Rembrandt worked. He taught many students. He allowed some of his students to work on the painting that he himself was painting. They tended not only to work on his paintings with him; they also imitated his style. The result is many paintings in the style of Rembrandt may have been painted by Rembrandt, a student of Rembrandt, or by Rembrandt and one or more of his students. Jesus Christ operated in the same way, inviting his followers to come with him, learn by observation, and do his work with him and after him. And, Jesus promised his students, his followers, that they would do greater works than he. We have no more greater treasure entrusted to our care than our children. Are the choices we are making today going to make their lives better in the future? Will they learn from us what it means to listen for a word from God? And will we help them discern God's voice as we live through the changing times?