

“Speak Lord, Your Servant is Listening”

*The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!”
Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening” (I Samuel 3:10).*

The other day my wife Sonya and I were standing in the kitchen and, as she was busy making breakfast, she began discussing plans for the day ahead. In response to a question she had asked about my schedule, I pulled out my iPhone. I did this fully intending to check my calendar and make sure it matched her plans for the day. And then, before I had even opened my calendar, I noticed that I had received a couple of new emails. So, as she continued talking, I started to read my email. Before I knew it, I had completely checked out of the conversation with my wife and instead, began responding to the emails. After several minutes had passed, I looked up from my “smart phone fog” and realized that Sonya had just asked me a question...and I had no idea what she was talking about. Noticing my obvious lack of attention she looked up from the counter and said, “Are you listening?”

This question is a good starting point for us as we consider today’s Old Testament text from I Samuel. You see, the Bible is clear that God still speaks to His people. It may not be in the direct and immediate manner that we see in today’s story about Samuel, but make no mistake, God’s voice can still be heard. The writer of Hebrews made this point when he began his book by saying, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Hebrews 1:1-2). And, in Romans, Paul tells us that it is this very same word of Christ that actually creates faith in our hearts. So, according to Holy Scripture, the question we need to consider is not, “Does God still speak?” The question that stands before us and carries with it an eternal weight is, “Are we listening to the Word of God?”

To truly confront this question as it relates to today’s reading, we need to explore the background of Samuel’s story. In the verses that lead up to Samuel’s amazing conversation with God, we are introduced to the priest Eli under whom, we are told, Samuel ministered in the Lord’s house. In the years that led up to our text, Eli essentially served as the high priest in charge of the Tabernacle and this was a big deal! He oversaw Israel’s sacrificial system through which forgiveness was communicated and, in accordance with this system, Eli was the mediator for God’s people. Another important detail in this story is the fact that Eli had also raised Samuel after the boy’s grateful mother Hannah had dedicated her firstborn son to the Lord’s service. In many ways Eli had been a father to Samuel, but Eli also had two sons of his own.

Eli’s sons were named Hophni and Phinehas and in the second chapter of First Samuel we are told that these two sons, who *also* served as priests of the people, were corrupt in every way. As representatives of the priestly line these two men held great power among the people, but rather than using the power of their office to intercede for the people and bring them the comfort of God’s Word, they abused their positions in the most despicable ways imaginable. They embezzled from the offerings people brought to the Lord, they used their positions as priests to coerce sexual favors from “the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting” (I Samuel 2:22) and, as it says in First Samuel 2:12, “they had no regard for the Lord.”

With utter arrogance and complete disregard for God’s Word, Hophni and Phinehas paraded their sins in front of the people, they made a mockery of the priesthood and they brought dishonor to the Lord. And how did Eli respond? Essentially, he gave his sons a slap on the wrist. Just as we have seen in some of the churches of our day and age, rather than removing them from their positions of power and punishing their wickedness Eli continued to look the other way. So finally, the Lord stepped in declaring a curse on Eli and his sons and removing the priesthood from their family line. In chapter four, we read about the destruction of Eli and his sons and watch as God places the mantle of Israel’s leadership on Samuel himself.

Now, the story of Eli and his sons is about as sensational as it gets, but aside from the shock value of this Old Testament scandal, there is an important message for us today. You see, we are lot like Eli and his sons. I can only assume that today I am preaching this sermon to Christians; to those who profess a belief in Scripture as the inspired Word of God; to people who trust in the Cross of Jesus Christ for forgiveness, for life and for eternal salvation. And yet today, this church is full of “Eli’s.”

My brothers and sisters, we have heard the voice of the Lord. We know what the Bible teaches. Many of us grew up in the church and were confirmed in the faith and confess the teaching of the Apostles and yet we still live in a way which shows a disregard for the Lord. We minimize our transgressions, we justify our sinful behavior, we excuse our disobedience and we sit comfortably in our sin; hearing but not listening, nodding approval while living in a manner that completely contradicts God's Word. And, it's important to say that this cavalier approach to God's Word puts us in real danger of eternal separation from God.

Today's Epistle reading is a perfect case study in this kind of convenient Christianity. Paul tells us in First Corinthians 6:13 that the body is not meant for sexual immorality and yet, on this point, we have not listened to God. We've allowed our culture to set the standards for our sexuality. We've bowed to the world's definition of morality. And even in the church, premarital sex is often ignored with a wink and a nod and extramarital affairs are common. *My friends for whom Christ died*, today God tells us loudly and clearly, "Flee sexual immorality" and this is a message for us not only to hear, but a word from the Lord to which we must listen.

Frankly, the story of Eli and his sons should scare us to death because it tells us that we simply can't overlook the response that God demands in the way we live our lives. The thoughts that spring from the heart and the words that flow from our lips and the actions born of our bodies should match the confession that comes out of our mouths and the truth of the matter is that they don't. And that is why today's text is so important.

You see, in this story of Samuel, we see what it means to really listen to God. And one of the first things this story teaches us is that we need to be where God promises to meet us. In his Explanation to the Third Commandment, Luther wrote, "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word but hold it sacred and gladly hear it and learn it." And in the corporate worship of the Church, God comes to His people. In fact, this is the primary purpose of worship; not that we sing or pray or give our offerings, but that God comes to us in His Word to teach, to convict, to instruct and to forgive. And, just as Samuel rested in the temple of the Lord, when we come together in corporate worship, we are in His presence; gathered around His Word and enveloped by His Sacrament, and He promises that here He is acting – no matter how sinfully we have lived, no matter how unsure our hearts may be, and no matter how much guilt we may feel God is working His purpose in our hearts through the Word spoken and made personal in His Body and Blood.

And, as we leave God's house and re-enter the world around us, this story of Samuel should also challenge us to consider the way in which we listen to His voice throughout our week. Do we read the Bible? Do we memorize Scripture verses? Do we study the Word with others who can help us in our walk with the Lord? In an age when temptation can be just a mouse click away, the same can be said for the strength that comes from listening to God's voice. If you've never explored the possibilities for meditation and Bible study online, you would be amazed at all of the tools available to help a believer listen to the Shepherd's voice (You can start by visiting Emmanuel's website and looking the links that promote daily devotions and Scripture reading: www.emmanuelutheran.org).

I also can't impress upon you strongly enough the importance of the body of believers and the strength the Lord delivers through the blessing of Christian fellowship. Jesus said, "where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20) and the writer of Hebrews pleads with us to "not give up the habit of meeting together..." and each week at Emmanuel, hundreds of believers gather in small, home-based study groups or in Bible studies here at church or in groups of two or three where they can share their struggles and be encouraged by their brothers and sisters with the Word. And, in this way, they are listening to the voice of the Lord.

In His word of judgment against Eli, God condemned Eli's sin and ripped the priesthood from his family and yet, in the middle of this harsh confrontation, He also made a promise that He would, "raise up...a faithful priest, who would do according to what is in God's heart and mind" (I Samuel 2:35). This prophecy of a perfect priest was realized in part with the Lord's call to Samuel, but ultimately this promise was and is fulfilled in Christ. My friends, God still speaks and His voice is one to which we must listen because the message that the Lord has for us is a message of life. It is a message of love. It is a message of acceptance. It is a message of forgiveness given to us freely in Jesus Christ – our Priest and our Sacrifice – Who died for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. And as we listen to His voice, we are being saved. "Speak Lord, for Your servant is listening" (I Samuel 3:10). May this be our prayer as we live and grow in the grace of Lord. Amen.

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