

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND ELIZABETH F. KEELER

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany (B)



14 January 2018

1 Samuel 3:1-20
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
John 1:43-51

Rarely has a story from the Old Testament, from a thousand years before the birth of Christ, rarely have words and characters better described our time today. Listen again, if you will, to the opening of our reading from First Samuel: “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” Here’s a recap of the story:

A young boy, Samuel, is serving an old blind priest in the temple, whose name is Eli. God wakes the youth Samuel who assumes that it is his old mentor Eli calling and he faithfully responds. Having been awakened several times by young Samuel, Eli finally recognizes that it is God who is speaking to the boy, and he coaches Samuel to respond to God’s call. Samuel obeys and utters inspirational words that have echoed through the millennia: “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” The straightforwardness of this little story should in no way mask its complexity nor its potential meaning for us today.

Let’s take a closer look at the characters: Young Samuel, blind old Eli, and God, noticing first that even while “The word of the Lord was rare in those days, and visions were not widespread” yet even so “the lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out.” Verse 3: “the lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out.” Similarly, even while visions may be rare in our modern world, they still can and do happen. One timely example is Dr. Martin Luther King. Dr. King had a vision; he had a dream for this world. And so I would offer straight off that God only seems to be sleeping if indeed that is true for you. Indeed, in the first of many wonderful twists, it turns out that while Samuel, Eli and the world actually sleep, God is delightfully awake and at work - calling and speaking, trying to break through Samuel’s sleepy fog, just as God is trying to get us awake and oriented enough to listen.

I suspect that many modern Christians might also identify with Samuel when we are told in verse 7 that he: “did not know the Lord, and that the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.” Like both Samuel and Eli, even as we strive to serve God, attending church and being faithful in our own clumsy ways, I suspect many of us operate without a sense confidence that we’re getting it quite right. I know I have my own doubts. And so like Samuel we are metaphorically sleepy and perhaps unsure in our perceptions of God at work in our lives and in the world. That’s ok and Samuel and Eli can offer us good company.

Because even as we groggily trudge along, aren’t we also restless knowing that we are being disturbed, don’t we too have a sense of a voice calling? Have some idea that we need to listen, and listen somewhat harder? And so we are reminded today that God’s voice reaches us even when we can’t quite identify it – even when we are too distracted to listen or when we attribute the voice somewhere else. God’s voice has always been persistent and strong and it will break through into our lives and our time.

And just as Samuel needed help identifying God's voice so we need help too. Remember the Lord spoke to Samuel but it was Eli who introduced him to God. Eli, the priest, was far past his prime and disgraced because his sons were corrupt and he failed to discipline them. Eli may be blind in more ways than one, but he has seen enough to be of invaluable help. He is blind but he is the one who recognizes that it is God calling and Eli knows that, regardless of the consequences, God's call must be listened to. Notice that it takes both the attentiveness of Samuel's young ears and the wisdom of Eli's older priestly heart to hear God clearly. We are called to listen and we often need one another's help to recognize God's voice.

I mentioned earlier that the straightforwardness of this story should in no way mask its potential meaning for us today, nor should we miss why it comes in the season of Epiphany. Why exactly are we hearing this ancient story about being called by God now? Recall we consider Sunday lectionary readings not in isolation, but always in a broader continuum of the unfolding story of God.

So let's quickly trace our path, the journey we've been on for the last of couple months. In December we were in Advent preparing for God to come. Then God came – incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth born at Christmas. Epiphany was eight days ago and so now, in this season after Epiphany, the lectionary readings describe God's call and the divine nature of Jesus.

Our readings from now until Lent are directing us to understand Jesus as our Lord, our God and King – showing us who Jesus is and what He does. Epiphanies – God revealed. If we can begin to notice, understand perhaps just in a doubtful whisper, then we are called to take the next steps. We are called to respond in some way. Samuel was called, the disciples, Phillip and Nathanael were called, Dr. King was called, and you and I are called. That is what Epiphany is really all about – here Jesus is, now what are we going to do? Being a disciple, a follower, however, is a choice. And before following, comes the important, often under appreciated, critical step of listening.

Even if we feel that the word of the Lord is rare in our day, perhaps especially when we feel that the word of the Lord is rare, friends, today we are reminded to listen. And in this important season after Epiphany when we are being shown who God is and asked to respond, I suggest that we would do well to be repeating Samuel's young words: Speak Lord for we, your servants, are listening. AMEN.



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