

## “LISTEN”

1 Samuel 3:1-20 January 14, 2018

Someone has suggested that the title for a sermon about this incident in the life of Samuel should be “The Danger of Sleeping in Church.” As Bible scholars know, there is another story in the New Testament that could be titled the same way (Acts 20:7-12). Young Eutychus of Troas was at worship one Sunday evening, seated on the windowsill. The apostle Paul was the visiting preacher, and he *did* preach...and preach and preach and preach. He preached until midnight. Then Eutychus dozed, and crashed. He fell out the window, toes over teacups, three stories to the ground. Miraculously, he survived, the fall *and* the preaching—“The Danger of Sleeping in Church.”

There is an old, old story of a man who kept falling asleep during the sermon. His pastor was getting frustrated and, one Sunday, decided to teach the man a lesson. As was his practice, he started to preach slowly, almost in a monotone—sure enough, the man soon fell into a deep sleep. The pastor then said to the congregation, “Everyone who wants to go to heaven, stand up.” Everyone stood...except, of course, the man who was fast asleep.

The pastor had everyone sit down. Then he gently said, “Everyone who wants to go to hell,” and with a bang on the pulpit and a rise in his voice, “stand up!”

The sleeping man snorted awake and jumped to his feet as everyone around him started to snicker. The man looked at all the people sitting around him, then looked at the pastor and said, “Preacher, I don’t know what we’re votin’ on. But it looks like you and are the only ones for it.”

“The Danger of Sleeping in Church”—of course, young Samuel

apparently was *supposed* to be sleeping. Some years before, his mother, Hannah, had brought him to Shiloh in fulfillment of a promise she had made to God before the boy was ever born—as a woman who had been unable to have children, she promised God that if she were to be granted that privilege, she would return the child to divine service. She was as good as her word—Samuel was born, and as soon as he was able to make it on his own, she brought the boy to the high priest Eli. After all, he was only hers for a little while; he was on loan from the Lord.

It was not the best of times for the people of Israel, but not the worst, either. There were no wars going on, no threats from hostile neighbors, although the Philistines were always looming near. The nation was not the unified whole it would come to be, but rather still a loose confederation of tribes. Religiously, no new ground was being broken. In fact, it seems the faith that had sustained the people through centuries of slavery, the exodus from Egypt, a generation of wilderness wandering, and finally settlement in the promised homeland, was now reduced to the routine, and for some pious fakers even an occasion for corruption. As the text has it, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” Sounds scarily familiar, doesn’t it?

Now we find Samuel. He is asleep in the sanctuary, apparently in his assigned position near the Ark of the Covenant. A voice comes in the early morning darkness: “Samuel...Samuel.”

The boy assumes it is Eli calling...no one else is there. Eli has called like this before—he is old, nearly blind; he needs help getting around. So, rubbing sleep from his eyes, the boy goes in to the old man and says, “Here am I. You called?”

Just as sleepily, the aging priest turns over on his palate and says,

“No, I didn’t. Go back to sleep.” So the boy turns, goes back through the curtain and lays down again. But now the call comes again: “Samuel!”

You can imagine the perplexed look that comes over the child’s face. He comes back to Eli, not quite so sleepily now. He was still awake from the first visit. “You called?”

Eli was wide awake now himself. No doubt he wondered at Samuel’s first visit. What was the voice the boy heard? Could he have just imagined it? Was it something he ate? Or was it something more? Could it have been the voice of God? Possibly, but not likely. God’s direct contact with human beings seemed to be a thing of the past. Oh, there was no doubt that God was involved with the lives of the people---Samuel’s very existence was the answer to a most specific prayer. But now, with this second call, Eli wonders. Maybe...just maybe? “No, I didn’t call. Go back to bed.”

So a puzzled twelve-year-old turns and goes out once more. But before he can get comfortable again, the voice returns: “Samuel.”

What in the world? This is getting ridiculous—he was up again and back to the priest. “You called?” He must have thought Eli was playing a game with him, but it was certainly a strange time of the night for games. But by now, Eli knows to whom the voice belongs. He turns that old gray head and those age-dimmed eyes to the boy and says, “No, I did not call. Go back and lie down. But if the voice comes again, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

Now the boy’s mind is racing a mile a minute. What could the Lord want with him? He had never heard of anyone else being called this way. So, with a shrug of the shoulders, it is back to bed again. And sure enough, a fourth time it comes: “Samuel...Samuel!”

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And the rest, as they say is history. The young boy who met God in the sanctuary responded to the divine call and went on to become Yahweh’s messenger to Israel, ranking in the eyes of the faithful with Moses and Abraham.

Aroused from his bed, Samuel leaps to his feet, exclaiming “Here I am! Here I am!” The Hebrew phrase, *hineni*, calls to mind Abraham responding to God’s call as he is prepared to sacrifice Isaac, or Moses’ response to the burning bush. Eli suggests a different tactic. It’s apparent to the old priest that God is at hand, and so he offers Samuel a bit of instruction; be still, be open, listen.

Eli may be a failed priest, but he is a priest nonetheless. He fulfills his obligation to help his young protégé remain radically open to the transcendent presence of God. It’s a bittersweet scene. The word handed to Samuel concerning Eli confirms the old priest’s suspicions. Judgement is coming, and immediately Samuel is entrusted with the hard task of speaking truth to power.

God’s call, as rare as it was, emerges. To receive that call, however, requires openness and willingness to be present. God’s call is a personal address, notes Eugene Peterson, not some abstract theological discourse. “God does not speak grand general truths, huge billboard declarations of truth and morals; the Lord’s speaking is to persons, named persons. Those addressed by such speech receive it the way Eli instructs Samuel: being still, remaining open, and actively listening.

When we are searching for ways to serve, it takes place in the present tense. John Koessler observes that it is easy to get wrapped up in the past or to be overwhelmed by the future: “The past is merely a succession of presents we have left behind.” By slowing down and becoming aware of the present, we surround ourselves with the immediacy of God’ presence. It’s astonishing to consider

what Eli's priesthood might have been had he embraced the wisdom he imparted to Samuel: sit still, remain open, listen.

My friend, Phyllis, passed away about ten days ago. She was another friend who had been present in my life for decades. Even though she suffered from Type I diabetes and severe scoliosis she was so filled with the Holy Spirit that she was a joy to be around. We were in a night circle together, Faith, and she was a Stephen Minister for me when I was a Stephen Leader at Phillips UMC, my home church in Lakewood, Colorado. I will be leaving mid-week to return to Lakewood for my days off and to help with her memorial service on Saturday. Then I will return to Pine Bluffs to be present for Bible Study and Worship on Sunday, the 21<sup>st</sup>.

In the training manual for Stephen Ministers, I found a section in the module on Listening. It had several helpful points that I thought I would share with you. It begins: Good listening requires three personal qualities in the listener: desire, commitment, and patience.

**DESIRE** A key to being a good listener is our desire to listen. We can't fake it! A person who comes to us for help in various situations can quickly detect a phony or superficial desire to listen. People do not listen well unless they really want to hear what is being said. To be a good listener, you have to *want* to do it. Such desire is at the heart of the words of James: "...be quick to listen, slow to speak" (James 1:19).

An example of this is a story titled "Insufficient Desire." "A telephone crisis volunteer was on duty at home one evening. While he was waiting for calls, he was watching TV (which was perfectly all right). The phone rang. The woman on the other end of the line was depressed and needed

someone to talk to. They began talking, but the volunteer continued to watch TV out of the corner of his eye. After a few minutes, hearing the TV in the background, the caller asked, ‘Are you watching TV?’ The volunteer replied, ‘The TV is on.’ Then the woman asked again, ‘Are you watching TV?’ The volunteer hesitated and then replied, ‘Yes, to be honest with you, I am.’ Without saying another word, the caller hung up.

The volunteer was upset, so he asked his supervisor about this situation. As they talked, the supervisor asked, ‘Did you want to listen to the caller that night?’ The volunteer answered, ‘Yes, I did. You know that I enjoy my work as a phone volunteer. But then the supervisor said, ‘Did you really want to listen that night? If you had really wanted to listen, wouldn’t you have turned off the TV?’’

Another characteristic of a good listener is to be **committed** to the listening task. You may be tired at the end of a long day of work, for example, but you have an appointment to meet a friend at 7:00pm. Even though you would much rather go home and relax, you keep your appointment. You discipline yourself to keep your commitment to the person. This commitment shows you care.

A third characteristic of a good listener is **PATIENCE**. St. Paul says, “Love is patient...It...always perseveres” (1 Corinthians 12:4,7) It can take time to develop a good caring relationship. One requirement is patient and intensive listening. If you are in a hurry and anxious to get the whole situation “solved” or “cured,” chances are that you will do a poor job of listening and caring. Your actions need to communicate that you are there to actively listen, not necessarily to push them into a quick solution. Sometimes this even applies when you might very clearly see the causes as well as possible solutions to the problem.

Patiently take time to understand the person’s needs and listen fully

as the person works through his or her situation. Many times, people in crisis already know exactly what they should do. What they need are patient, listening ears—people who can be completely present as they express their feelings. God works through such caregiving to inspire in people the courage to do what they know they must do.

Epiphany offers the opportunity for quiet moments of contemplation. In Epiphany, the cacophony of holiday noises has ceased. Distractions are reduced. Aside from some football games and winter's bite, there are few things competing for our attention. This context may provide a ripe moment for searching the ways we explore and discern God's call.

As we begin a new year we have new opportunities and possibilities for working in the church. As we look back in celebration of the year 2017 and the ways God has been working in our church, we can look forward with the certain knowledge that He is calling us now—in the present tense—to listen, to answer, to serve. It may be a fresh look at a position we've held for awhile or it may be something new that challenges us to move out of our comfort zones. What does it mean for us to say “Here I am!” Who are the mentors among us who will teach us the mindfulness of the moment so that we might say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”?

In a *Family Circus* comic for New Year's Day, husband and wife Bill and Thelma are sound asleep in bed. Bill has a pillow covering his face and Thelma's hair is all in disarray. It is obvious that they are weary from a long holiday season. Seven-year-old Bill is standing on his mother's side of the bed, tugging on the sheets. Billy says, “C'mon, Mommy, get up! You kept sayin' you couldn't wait to be done with 2017—it's all done!” Despite the hardships that

each of us face, when we are called to serve Jesus we get up out of bed and keep moving forward.

On Monday we mark the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. Despite the obstacles that Dr. King endured, the word of the Lord was not rare in those days, except maybe to those who were not listening. Fifty years after his death, the realities of racism plague our nation like the exploits of Eli's sons. Who is listening, silent and still, for God this weekend? In this moment, filled with chaos and scandal, who will speak a word of truth to those who will listen? How many of us are willing to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening?"

*Please pray with me...*

Listening Lord, we pour out our hearts to you in praise, sorrow, profound need, or joyous thanksgiving, and you are always there for us—listening, caring, soothing, and healing. Give us the patience, compassion, and skill we need to follow your example and also be good listeners. Give us opportunities to listen to one another, and use our care for one another to build bonds of Christian love between us. Thank you for hearing our prayers and for answering them. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.