

Sermon: 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany
1-15-12: Trinity Lutheran Church, Mt. Healthy, OH

Look around! Did you notice the presence of the color green in the sanctuary? Because green represents growth, this is a visual cue to us that we are once again focusing on growing in our Christian lives. Well what do you know? Nothing we do in the church is by accident, even the colors we use. So, as we see this color and think about growth, one of the primary questions we ask is this: How does God call us to grow? Today, we see some of those answers in our texts. In our gospel, we hear Jesus call to Philip and Nathaniel, and learn that we grow by following and by sharing the invitation with others. In the reading from 1st Corinthians, the Apostle Paul calls us to remember that we belong to God and that our growth as God's people has implications for how we live our lives. However, it is the first lesson I want to focus on today, for we hear about the call of the boy Samuel and this text lifts up that we grow by listening.

As we talk about our first reading, it is important to set the stage a bit. As any good English teacher will tell you, a story always has a solid beginning, middle, and end. Because our reading picks up in the middle of the story, it might be good to talk a bit about the beginning. When the book of Samuel opens, we meet a woman named Hannah. She and her husband Elkanah are unable to have children, so she prays to God for a child. God hears her prayer and she gives birth to Samuel, but then she does an amazing thing. She takes her son and gives him to the God. She places him under the care of Eli, the temple priest at Shiloh. Her actions are a reminder to us that every good thing comes from God and that we are to turn those gifts back over to God!

As Samuel is growing up, there is much turmoil in the lives of the people of Israel. Eli's sons are corrupt. They are treating the offerings brought to the temple with contempt and engaging in some fairly seedy behaviors. The Philistines are a threat to the safety and well-being of the Israelites. As our first lesson opens, we even learn that God has, by and large, been silent. The word of the Lord is rare and visions are not widespread. All of these events would have contributed to a state of anxiety and unrest, of fear and uncertainty.

However, God is not inactive during this time. Instead, God does a new thing. God decides to raise up a prophet and chooses an unlikely candidate. As the 1st reading begins, we see that God chooses a small boy who is sleeping in the temple, a boy named Samuel. God shows up and summons Samuel, but Samuel assumes that it is Eli who is calling to him. Three times he runs to Eli and on the third time, Eli gets it. Eli, the old priest, knows that the Lord is calling to Samuel, and he tells him to go back, and if called again, say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening".

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. These are good words; words that can become our prayer as we continue to consider how God calls us to follow. However, I think there is a challenge with these words. We are a people who have, in many ways, forgotten how to listen. We proclaim that we can't pay attention if all we are doing is listening. Out of the other side of our mouths, we say, "I'm speaking! Listen to everything I have to say". We don't like to listen, but we demand that others listen to us! Certainly, this is part of our sinful nature. Sin turns us in on ourselves, and in our sin, we insist that all our needs be met, while showing little concern for the needs of others.

In addition, I think we are afraid to listen. When someone comes to us with a problem and we invest time in really listening, that means we have to actually help them shoulder the burden. Instead, we tend to offer quick fixes and dispense advice as though we have all the answers. When we do such things we are, in a sense, saying, "Please go away and handle the problem yourself". On the other hand, when we listen, we are saying, "I want to know more about what you are experiencing and journey with you as you struggle".

I particularly think we fear listening to God. What if God summons us to do a task or speak a word that is not easy or that moves us out of our comfort zone? Look at what happens to Samuel. He says, "Speak, for your servant is listening" and God gives him a message for Eli that is not exactly easy to share. Through Samuel, Eli learns that the sins of sons will impact the future of Eli's family. You see, priesthood was passed down from father to son. Now, Eli's family will no longer be allowed to be priests, because of the choices they have made. Indeed, Samuel is called to speak difficult words!

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When Samuel listened, his initial task was not an easy one, but at the same time, it showed that God was present with the people and giving them a prophet to help guide them. So what happens when we listen to God? I think there are any number of possible outcomes. We might find through our listening that God is calling us to rest and let others care for us. There are times we are burdened and troubles weigh heavily upon us. At those times, it is much harder to listen to God, because we are distracted by so much else. Yet, God might be speaking to us words of comfort and peace, hope and reassurance.

Like Samuel, we may find that God calls us to speak challenging words. Sometimes, it may be a message we have to speak to ourselves as we honestly assess our actions and our choices. Perhaps it is a word we are to speak to someone else, whose actions are harmful to us, the church, themselves, or others. Listening and discerning the speaking of an unpopular word is difficult work, because we must make sure we are speaking God's word and not advancing our own opinions. When I served as a campus pastor, I will never forget finding out that students in one particular religious organization were harassing another student, telling him that his family was going to hell because they were Episcopalians. It seems rather unlikely that they were speaking the word of God, although they claimed to speak on God's behalf.

Through listening to God, we may discover that God is calling us to move out of our comfort zone and do a new thing. God might call us to become more deeply involved in ministries here; or to give more generously; or even to devote more time and energy to the study of scripture or presence at worship. Whatever the case may be, God's call that we do a new thing, or stretch ourselves a bit more, will be uncomfortable. It means that God will call us to change, to be different people. Change, as we all can attest, is difficult and sometimes even painful. Yet, God does not call to us and then abandon us. No, God stays with us because we belong to God.

As those who belong to God, we can trust that God will call to us. So, the question remains: are we listening to God? As individuals, are we listening to what God would have us do in our daily lives? I struggle with this often. The great myth is that because someone is a pastor, they have listened to and responded to God's call. However, any pastor who tells you they have it figured it out is either lying to you or themselves. I sometimes wonder if I am really listening to God and doing what God wants me to do. There are days I want to say, "Here I am, Lord. Send someone else!" As an individual, I struggle with the listening piece.

However, we are more than just individuals. As a congregation, are we listening to God? Are we loving and serving others as God would have us do, or are we comfortable, insisting that all is well? Are we refusing to change, clinging to traditions that no longer work, but simply make us feel good? Are we satisfied with plateaus, reaching a certain point in our work together and refusing to move forward?

As we examine our listening as individuals and a congregation; as we ask "are we listening to God", I think we will find that the answer is sometimes "Yes!"; sometimes "No!" and sometimes "Maybe?" Let us celebrate the times the answer is "yes!" Let us explore more deeply the "maybe's". Let us refuse to be satisfied with the "no's". Together, let us commit to more often shutting our mouths, opening our ears, and listening to God. The good news is that God will not call to us without providing what we need. Just as Samuel had Eli, who helped him discern that God was calling, so, too, God surrounds us with the faith community – people who help us discern how God might be summoning us to follow. Plus, God will never call us without giving us the words to speak or the strength we need to do the task.

After all, God will most certainly call to us, as individuals and a community. As those who know that God calls us, let us be bold listeners! In fact, this week, I issue a challenge for all of us. As each new day begins, let us humbly pray, as Samuel did, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening". Perhaps we will all be a bit surprised at what God says and how God summons us to follow. Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.

Amen.