

“Noise Gets in the Way”

Date: January 17, 2021

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: John 1:43-51; 1 Samuel 3:1-20

Occasion: Epiphany 2, Year B

Themes: Calling, Listening, Discernment

Few stories in the Bible fill the faithful with as much envy as the story of Samuel’s calling. After all, here is a call that is both unmistakably clear and remarkably consistent. With patient urgency, God’s voice repeats until Samuel at last understands and responds.

And then, when Samuel begins his role as prophet – speaking on behalf of the Lord, he repeats the message he has received from God, and everyone who hears accepts both his message and his role as prophet of God.

I don’t know about you, but there have not been very many occasions in my own life when I heard the voice of God as clearly as Samuel did. As a person of faith, I wish that I had. In fact, I’m a little jealous of Samuel. Aren’t there times in your life when you wish the Lord would speak directly to you?

Most of us do not hear voices when we receive a calling from God. And so, we assume the time when God talks to people is over. Or maybe we decide God only talks to mystics, or to really holy people. And since we’re not mystics or really holy people, then God wouldn’t be talking to us.

But I would like to suggest this morning, that God wants to have a conversation with all of us. In fact, God is trying to get our attention and speak to us, every day. Through the beauty and power of nature, God speaks of his creative power. Through the words of the Bible, God gives us the guiding principles for our lives. Through the testimony of other believers, God inspires us. Through prayer, God whispers messages of hope and inspiration. God **IS** speaking to us, every day.

But noise gets in the way. We often fail to hear the voice of the Lord calling to us. Or perhaps we hear something, but we misunderstand what it is we're hearing. Noise is anything that corrupts the integrity of the message. Let me give you some non-religious examples.

We're driving in our car, listening to the radio, when suddenly the sound becomes garbled, full of static. Could be atmospheric conditions, or some fault in the radio itself. Or, it could be we have simply driven out of range of the signal. The message may be hard to decipher or we may lose it altogether.

Or, consider the messages we receive through the printed page. Mistakes, errors, typos, poor printing – all make it difficult for the reader to obtain the message as it was intended. If you're someone who still has your news delivered to your doorstep each morning, if your carrier oversleeps or the roads are bad, you may not get your morning paper. Guess what, you don't the message.

Those are all examples of external interference to the message. Noise interferes, gets in the way of you receiving the intended message.

But sometimes the noise isn't from the outside; it comes from inside of us. For example, someone is speaking to us but we're so busy with our own thoughts, thinking about what we're going to say, we may not hear clearly what the other person is trying to convey.

It happens not only between married people, but at work, among friends, between people trying to discuss differences of opinion. Think of how difficult it is to have a political discussion in our time. It's often because we don't pause long enough to actually hear what the other person is trying to say. The noise inside our own heads interferes with the message.

Let's turn now to our scripture passage, God's call to Samuel.

Samuel was a young apprentice to the elder prophet and priest, Eli. No doubt he had listened to Eli for years, perhaps hearing only a few other people speak. Lying in bed one night he hears a voice, “Samuel, Samuel.” The young man hears his name being called in the night and assumes it was Eli. Samuel’s inner thoughts became the noise which got in the way of him hearing God’s voice clearly. He assumed it was Eli calling.

So, he goes back to bed and tries to sleep again. “Samuel, Samuel,” the Lord calls again. It wakes him up. Maybe the older prophet is talking in his sleep and doesn’t know it. Samuel gets out of bed and goes to see Eli again to see what he wants. Again, his expectation, his assumptions, got in the way of his hearing God clearly.

What’s interesting, to me, is that Eli the prophet is so slow to understand it was God who was calling Samuel. But perhaps he is not to blame. We are told the word of the Lord was rare in those days and that not many people had heard God’s voice or had a vision from the Lord. Eli was slow to interpret what was happening because of *his* own experience – *of not hearing God*.

This happens a third time, and this time Eli “gets it,” and tells young Samuel that it is God speaking to him. Eli tells the young boy to answer the next time he hears the Lord, say to Him: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Samuel obeyed, and then, having heard and understood, having seen and perceived, Samuel is anointed and becomes a major prophet of his day.

Friends, God is calling to us every day. The voice of Christ is speaking to us. But are we listening? Many times noise gets in the way of our hearing. We’re too busy. We have too many distractions. We’re on our phones, our computers too long. We spend too much time listening to the

news, or to music. Our hearts and minds are on overload. Noise gets in the way of our hearing God speak to us.

Without some intentional time of quiet listening, we won't be able to hear God speaking to us. Our minds are too full of our own thoughts, or the thoughts of other people which we have taken in during the day. The noise in our heads keeps us from hearing God speaking to us.

Some time ago a social experiment was conducted at a metro station in Washington DC. A cold January morning, a man started to play the violin; he played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. It was during rush hour and thousands of people went through the subway station on their way to work.

In the 45 minutes that he played, only six people stopped and listened for a bit. Children were often the ones who wanted to listen. A few gave him money but most passed on by. He collected \$32 for his brief concert in the subway.

When he finished playing and silence took over, no one noticed it. There was no applause nor was there any recognition. No one knew this, but the violinist was none other than Joshua Bell, one of the best musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces of music ever written with a violin worth over 3.5 million dollars.

Two days before this social experiment, Joshua Bell sold out a theater in Boston and the average ticket price was \$100. The people doing the social experiment wanted to know if people would recognize beauty in a commonplace environment at an inappropriate hour. Do we stop to appreciate beauty if we recognize it?

One possible conclusion from this experiment could be, that if we don't have a moment to stop and listen to one of the best musicians in the

world, playing the best music ever written, on one of the finest instruments ever made, how many other things are we missing? Could we be missing the voice of God, calling out to us in numerous ways, each and every day?

I'd like to invite those of you listening to me today to participate in a little experiment this coming week. For the next seven days I'd like you to pay attention as you go through your days and notice when you think about God. Maybe you'll want to write it down in a notebook; keep a journal of your God thoughts.

I'd like us to notice when God comes into our minds, and what other thoughts we have when God enters our awareness. Are you thankful for something? Do you 'hear' God telling you to do something? Do you hear the Holy Spirit convicting you that something you said or did wasn't pleasing to God?

Would you try it with me this week – listening intentionally for God? Let's listen for God's voice, even in the ordinary moments of the day. May this be our prayer: "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

Amen.