

LISTEN!

(02/02/2025)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

Luke 9:28-36

“The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. . . . Then the Lord called, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ and he said, ‘Here I am!’” (1 Samuel 3:1,4)

This morning, once again, we are drawing from the Hebrew scriptures, in particular the part of the Deuteronomic history that has been preserved in what is known as the first and second books of Samuel. The two books, which were originally one, derive their name from the great prophet who dominates the early chapters of the first book. These books describe the rise of the kingship in Israel around the eleventh century B.C.E. and, as we heard last week, they tell us about the life of King David.

However, although these books of the Bible are grounded in history, we do not need to read them solely as history. They can be read as literature, as a fairy tale, or as a dream that is speaking directly to us. The passage we heard this morning tells us something about the importance of listening.

In another spiritual tradition, Zen Buddhism, we note there is a story about a master and his disciple that illustrates the importance of listening, about really listening. The disciple complained that, even after many years, the master would not share the secret of enlightenment with him. Although the master denied that this was true, the disciple refused to believe him.

One day the master and the disciple were walking together in the hills when they heard a bird sing.

“Did you hear that bird sing?” asked the master.

“Yes,” replied the disciple.

“If you *really* heard that bird sing, you will know that I have not hidden the ultimate secret from you,” said the master.

Suddenly the disciple was enlightened!

What is the message of this story? If we *really* heard a bird sing or the sound of a rushing stream, if we *really* saw a bare winter tree the way Brother Lawrence saw the tree that changed his life and led to his development of the spiritual discipline of the Practice of the Presence of God, we would not only know the meaning of the story; we would also know *God*. We would know beyond words and concepts. We would experience what it means to be enlightened, what it means to be saved!

The Jesuit Anthony DeMello, whose book *One Minute Wisdom* we have explored in our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group, in commenting on this story, said,

What was that you said? You have heard dozens of birds sing and have seen hundreds of trees? Ah, was it the tree you saw or the label? If you look at a tree and see a tree, you have not really seen the tree. When you look at the tree and see a miracle--then, at last, you have seen! Did your heart never fill with wordless wonder when you heard a bird in song?

This morning, as we prepare ourselves to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us think about what it means to listen. Listening is a special kind of presence. *Listening is a special kind of presence.* We bring this presence to ourselves when we listen to the deepest parts of ourselves. We bring this presence to other people when we are physically and emotionally present to them, when we truly listen to them. We bring this presence to God when we listen to what God is saying to us.

The psychoanalyst Karl Menninger has said:

Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.

Menninger is saying that listening is a creative force. It functions like a magnet—drawing the two parties closer together. It is a creative energy field in our relationships with our family and friends. It is a creative energy field in our relationship with God. This is because we not only listen to God; God listens to us. God hears, feels our prayers. By drawing us closer, God's listening creates us, enables us to unfold, expand, individuate.

Dare we say that the creative force of which Menninger speaks works both ways? This is a basic principle of what is called Process Theology, a relatively new school of theology that we could trace back to the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, a perspective that we have discussed in the past few meetings of our Spiritual Study & Growth Group. Remember, a relationship, if it is a real relationship, should shape *both* parties. Our ability, our willingness to open ourselves to God, to listen to God, enables our consciousness to expand. As we listen to God, we enable God's consciousness to expand as well. Through God's listening to us and through our listening to God *we co-create the universe!*

Let's start with how an anthropomorphized God, a God whom we picture in human form, "speaks to us." God speaks to us in many different ways--if we have ears to hear. As the Zen master noted, God speaks to us and is present to us through the beauty of nature. The Hebrew scriptures witness to how God spoke through the Law and the prophets, through the nation of Israel. The Christian scriptures witness to how God spoke through the Incarnation, the Word

become flesh. God spoke through Jesus of Nazareth--through his life, his teaching, his death and resurrection. In this morning's gospel lesson, an account of what we call the Transfiguration, God tells the disciples, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." Listen to him.

The Protestant Reformers emphasized the importance of the Bible. They believed that God speaks to us through the Bible, and that it was important that everyone should be able to read the Bible in his/her own language. As Protestants, the Bible is central to our faith.

The Roman Catholic church has historically emphasized the importance of the church. They believe that God has spoken to each generation through the teachings of the church, what the church identifies as doctrines and dogmas and fundamental beliefs. Whereas Protestants tend to center their worship services in the Bible and the sermon, the central part of worship for Catholics is the mass, the eucharist, the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Both of these religious traditions, despite their differences, hold a central belief in common. It is the belief that God seeks to be present to us, with us and within us. It is the belief that God is trying to speak to us. God is trying to be present to us, to be present with us, to speak to us through the Bible and through the church, and that both serve as channels of presence. God not only spoke to us in the past; God is still speaking! Everything in our worship service speaks to us--if we listen.

Listening is a special kind of presence. Whether we experience God through our sacred music, the words of scripture, or the elements of bread and wine, our experience of that God who creates, expands, and unfolds us depends on our ability to listen, to receive.

How foolish it would be for us to think that God speaks to us only in certain limited or prescribed ways! As the Zen master noted, if we *truly* saw the miracle of a tree, if we heard the song of a bird not with our ears but with our heart, we would no longer have to believe--we would know!

We need to listen to God as God calls us forth into fullness of life as individuals, as a church, and as a world. We need to learn to listen to the moving wind of the Holy Spirit. In John 3:8 we read what Jesus said to Nicodemus:

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit

We, like Nicodemus, need to listen to the sound of the Holy Spirit. We, like Samuel, need to listen to the still small voice that whispers to us from within.

Listening is the most important dimension of prayer. Prayer is an opening of ourselves to God, a listening for the different ways God can speak to us. God is constantly reaching out to us, but our ability to enter into this relationship depends on our ability to listen.

In the moments of quiet in our communion service, let us listen very carefully for that still small voice that called out to Samuel. Let us open our inner ears, the ears of our heart to that God who is very near to us, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Let us open our hearts to that God who is trying to create us, trying to shape the unfolding of our life. God is speaking to us in many different ways, if we would only take the time to listen.

In 1895, Clara Scott wrote both the words and the music to one of my favorite hymns. Let the words of this hymn be our prayer as we enter into the presence of our Lord through the Sacrament of Holy Communion and as we leave our service of worship and return to our everyday lives:

*Open my ears, that I may hear
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;
And while the wave notes fall on my ear,
Everything false will disappear.*

*Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready my God, Thy will to see;
Open my ears, illumine me,
Spirit divine.*

Have you heard the song of a bird? Have you *really* heard the song of a bird? If you have, then you know the secret!

*A communion meditation shared by the Rev. Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
February 2, 2025*