

Epiphany 3
1 Samuel 3:1-20
January 15, 2012
"The Word of the Lord"

3 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. ²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. ⁴Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."



Our passage begins with a strange sounding statement: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."

In our contemporary vernacular, that phrase, "the Word of the Lord" is synonymous with the Bible. After the reading of this passage I announced with great authority, "The Word of the Lord," and you responded in affirmation, "Thanks be to God."

We think of the Bible as God's word, as "the word of the Lord," and now doubt we should. These words do speak to us with clear, unique, and divine authority. In these words we do indeed encounter the word of the Lord.

But the Bible almost never refers to sacred scripture using that phrase, either in the Old Testament or the New.

In the Old Testament, when we hear that phrase “the word of the Lord,” the authors are speaking about God’s ability to speak directly to the prophet or the people through words, visions, angels, and other similar mechanisms. Almost every Old Testament prophet declares “the word of the Lord came to me” and this is what was spoken. The word of the Lord is the communication of God’s will and wisdom to God’s people. It is prophecy; it is knowledge; it is judgment; and it is redemption.

In the New Testament, that phrase is used, particularly by Luke, in much the same way we might speak about the “good news” about Jesus. Luke declares that the word of God is growing among the people, increasing in power and reach. John, however, describes Jesus as the Word—the word made flesh and dwelt among us. For John, the word of God is Jesus Christ himself.

Nevertheless, it is good and proper for us to think of the Bible as God’s word to us. Indeed it is. It is the word of God written and in it we encounter the apostolic testimony about the Word of God incarnate, who is Jesus Christ. It may seem like splitting hairs, but it’s an important distinction. We don’t worship the Bible; we worship the one to whom the Bible points.

Ironically, we may relate deeply to the notion that God’s word is rare and often unheard. Often commentators have noted the disappearance of God over the span of the Old Testament. In Genesis, God communicates freely with Adam and Eve, walking with them in the Garden. In Exodus, God leads the people out of bondage by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. The seas are parted and the world is turned topsy-turvy by the mighty hand of the Lord.

But as the monarchy begins, already God’s word has grown quiet. It’s as if the mighty acts of God become lost in court intrigue and international politics.

No doubt we in our modern age can relate to the hiddenness of God. Science, technology, and modern life have made it difficult, if not impossible, for us to hear God speaking to us. One of the profound ironies of this morning’s text is that God’s voice is so unexpected in the Temple.

Little sleeping Samuel is surprised and confused by God’s voice. Again, how surprisingly modern is our text that God’s voice is unexpected in a house of Worship. How many of us have come here today truly expecting to hear God speaking to us with clarity, with vision, with purpose?

It is interesting, and a little funny, that Samuel’s name means “God has heard.” It’s also interesting that Eli means “My God.”

The Lord calls to “God has heard,” and “God has heard” runs to his master, “My God,” only to be told to go back to bed. It happens three times before “My God” tells “God has heard” that the voice may be the voice of the Lord.

Now truly awoken and ready to listen, “God has heard” cries out, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

And then God says to Samuel that he’s about to do something that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.

When was the last time God’s word brought tingles to your ears? When was the last time something so delightful and joyous came upon you that you tingled with enthusiasm and the hairs on the back of your neck stood on end?

If we really listen to the gospel, it should bring some tingles to us, should it not? The good news that God in Christ Jesus redeems, forgives, and renews is very, very good news, is it not? It is such wonderful news that it should make us tingle with joy and cry out to the Lord--Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

But, with that Good News, there comes an awesome responsibility.

The news God shares with Samuel isn’t easy news to hear. It is news concerning Eli, the very man who has introduced Samuel to the Lord. Eli was an old, blind, disgraced priest, whose own sons had been guilty of blasphemy and Eli had been powerless to control them. His blindness may have been more than just physical.

As Lawrence Wood has noted, the charges against him mirror the charges against us, the ineffectual priests of our time who have watched our churches slip into trouble without the courage or the fortitude to stand in the gap.

No, there’s nothing easy about the Word of the Lord. Samuel has been told that a titanic shift is about to occur, and he will be the one to stand in the gap. Though he doesn’t know it yet, he will be the one to anoint Israel’s first King, her first Messiah, only to see that monarch fall as well, and even before the end of King Saul’s reign, he will anoint his successor, David.

Samuel will become a kingmaker. Lawrence Wood writes:

God held the boy—and God help us. In local and in national life, clergy and laity alike have long played the role of kingmakers. This has been true in progressive black church, conservative white churches, Catholic as well as Protestant. The role has not often been to our credit....

But Samuel, unlike the today’s kingmakers, is not looking for a man to front his own agenda.

Samuel is looking for a man after God’s own heart. The only problem is that looking into the heart of another person is difficult, at best. Samuel’s job will not be easy. He will have his own son’s turn out to be scoundrels too.

Just as Samuel will spend the rest of his life responding to the challenge of God's word, so too will we spend the rest of our lives wrestling with the demands of the gospel.

Our calling to be Christians is somewhat different than that of Samuel's calling to be a kingmaker. We too are called by name in our baptism, but we are not called to make earthly kings. We are called instead to follow and serve the Christ, the King of Kings.

It is a calling that should make our ears tingle; it should fill us with wonder and awe, but it will not be easy. We are called to do seemingly impossible things. Yes, we cry Hallelujah at our own forgiveness, but Jesus is all too quick to bid us go and forgive those who've wronged us. He tells us to do as he has done: to act with mercy, to love our enemies, to give to all who beg.

It seems, quite frankly, impossible.

We are called to be peacemakers and yet to stand for justice.

We are called to be merciful and yet to defend the poor and the innocent.

We are called to love our enemies and yet stand firm against powers and principalities of sin and destruction.

Every day this church faces the difficulties of the gospel. Throughout the work week, people come to the church seeking assistance. We have a fund called the Communion Fund which is set aside to help give assistance to those in crisis in our community.

If we gave to everyone who came bringing a need before us, not only would we quickly deplete the whole of the church budget, but we would also help enable some who've become lost in drugs, addiction, alcoholism, and chaos. Some come to us truly in crisis and needing help, others come seeking assistance fraudulently, and some others because of addiction.

The gospel tells us to give to all who beg, but it also commends us to be good stewards. How can we do both? We try to be judicious and prayerful in our assistance program. We try to help only those with legitimate need. Sometimes we get it right and sometimes we don't.

I believe we've helped save lives, truly, with the Communion Fund. I'm also sure we've been scammed before. It's a delicate balance—holding compassion and justice in our hands.

A good example of these complexities has come, rather unexpectedly I might add, from the office of our outgoing Governor.

Many of us have been shocked by the pardons issued by Governor Barbour, and that shock transcends all political divisions. He has defended his decisions to pardon some felons guilty of violent crimes by saying that he believes in redemption.

Indeed our faith is one in which no person is thought to be beyond the redemptive power of God's grace and love. Yet, our fear is not in redemption, per se, but in one person's ability to see into the heart of another and know that redemption has occurred.

We should be a people of mercy and redemption, but we must also be a people of justice, a people who protect the innocent from the violent.

There is no doubt that our criminal justice system is broken. There is little attention given to rehabilitation and even less to redemption. Often felons earn their PhD in violence and crime in our prisons, only then to be released back into the public. Our system is about retribution and penalty, not about reconciliation and restoration.

Samuel faced the same realities: Eli, his mentor had failed God. Saul, the first king anointed by his own hand, had failed God. David, too, a man after God's own heart, committed deep and terrible sin. Samuel was caught between compassion and justice when King David was found guilty of adultery and murder. The law commanded his death, but how can Samuel kill the Lord's anointed, Israel's messiah? Samuel must carry the impossible burden of justice and mercy upon his shoulders.

Samuel was even faced with the sin of his own sons. Samuel was never quite skilled enough to look into the heart of another person and know with certainty the condition of that person's heart. At best, he could see but dimly into the heart of another.

Justice and mercy seem to exist in tension—seemingly at war with one another. How can we practice love and mercy, when we can't even see deeply into the heart of another person?

Without defending the actions of Governor Barbour in the least, perhaps all we can do is prayerfully and earnestly try accomplish a balance between both justice and mercy; but if we must err, let us err slightly more often on the side of mercy than justice.

After all, God has chosen to forgive and redeem us, and none of us deserve a bit of it.

The Good news is this, what is impossible for us is not impossible for God. While justice and mercy may always be in tension in our world, they are not in tension in the heart of God. God's justice and God's mercy are so perfectly interwoven as to be the two sides of the same eschatological coin.

God also can see where human eyes cannot. WE see dimly into the heart of another, but God see into the heart with divine perspicuity. We cannot trust our vision, but we can trust God's vision and God's promises.

I know I've sort of meandered all over the place in this sermon. This has been a sermon of rabbit trails and tangents.

But if you take anything away from this sermon take this: In this age where miracles are rare and the voice of God is often unheard, even in the church, know that God still speaks. Know that you are called

by name. Know that what God has planned for you is wonderful, but it is also an impossible challenge—the challenge of being peacemakers in a world of war. Know that your response will not be perfect; know that you will make mistakes; but know that despite your mistakes, the promises of God stand forever, unchanged.

The gospel of Jesus Christ can only be greeted by tingles and hallelujahs and a full lifetime of fear and trembling as we wrestle with being both just and compassionate in a world of vengeance and lawlessness.