

Sermon preached at The Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia
Sunday January 18 2015
The Reverend Alan Neale
"Dumb, Deaf or both?"

"If God seems far away, guess who moved" – oh dear, the phrase is painfully trite and cliché yet nevertheless poignant true and common.

Mindful of today's Old Testament lesson all about aged deafness and youthful confusion, maybe the opening cliché can be adapted to read, "If God seems dumb/voice impaired, guess who became deaf/hearing impaired?".

The opening of First Samuel, chapter 3 describes a barren and parched terrain where divine word is rare and divine vision is scarce. It is an awful prospect then, and an awful predicament now... without hearing the word of the Lord our lives become brittle and meaningless, without seeing the vision of the Lord our lives become static and hopeless. Consider the poignant plight of the church community without voice or vision of the Lord; even more wretched consider the same plight of the ordained minister.

As the verses continue, we observe the poignant state of a man of God whose deafness and blindness of soul are perfectly expressed in hearing loss (he hears nothing when the Lord is calling Samuel) and blindness (the lamp was still lit).

Then comes the well-written, engaging, human and comedic story; it runs almost like some pantomime farce... three times Samuel wakes the somnolent old man and, finally, all is revealed.

Then the culminating verse, the conclusive statement... I Samuel 3:10, "Speak, for your servant is listening".

Finally the servant believes the Lord constantly speaks... finally the servant is acutely expectant... finally the servant is ready to act.

Finally, Samuel believes that the Lord speaks. It is a question common to many a Christian and to many a spiritual seeker, "How can I hear the Lord?"; it is a statement made in general conversation and in church study, "But I have never really heard the Lord". This is a reasonable question, a valid statement but it all hinges on something foundational and basic, "Do you believe the Lord speaks... today?". Is this a belief almost as natural as breath itself? Genesis 1 – in beautiful, alluring refrain "The Lord spoke, and it was done"; John 1 – the profound, stark statement "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God; and Hebrews 1 – the poignant, insightful

declaration “In many and various God has spoken... but now through a Son”. This belief is pregnant with other insights into the Lord ready to be born... but here we begin.

Finally, Samuel is acutely expectant. It is so very sad, and something that Eli comes to regret, that Samuel was being raised, in effect, in a non-believing temple environment. Yes, the worship continued; yes, the doors were kept open and yes, the lamps were still lit and the sacrifices made but... there was no vibrancy of alertness, no quickening of expectancy. Eli’s body had grown old, well you can’t help that and the alternative is not attractive... his body had inevitably grown old but so had his spirit and that was not inevitable. Maybe, like me, he considered retirement but, unlike me, he was fearful for the future and was anxious about the fate of the temple without him! My first sponsor said to me that when he started attending AA meetings “my spirit was rekindled”. 2 Timothy 1:6 “Stir into flame the fire and strength that is within you”. But perhaps it’s easier to expect nothing, then it’s so much more convenient for our expectations to be achieved!

Finally, Samuel is ready to act. Samuel, Eli, the temple community had all been in a comatose state, paralyzed, inert, inactive. But now with vibrant faith and alert expectancy the servant, even the young child, is ready to do the work of the Lord. To be a servant is to pay close attention to those being served; to be a servant is to accept a calling, a vocation to aid and assist. This prayer of St. Ignatius says it well,

Lord, teach me to be generous:
to serve you as you deserve;
to give and not to count the cost;
to fight and not to heed the

wounds;
to toil and not to seek to rest;
to labor and to ask for no reward
save that of knowing I do your will.

The Bible readings for Sunday and throughout the week are appointed by compilers of our lectionary; sometimes these dear folk suggest that verses of Bible passages or Psalms be excluded to save our poor souls the apparent terror of human suffering and the fearsomeness of human emotion. The suggestion was made for today but we ignored it. So this happy story of temple folk ends with promise of suffering and anguish, the pain of dealing with rebellion and predicament of consequences. But, and here’s great light, Eli so ready, so very ready, to hear the word of the Lord “My son,” Eli said, “what did the Lord say to you? Tell me everything”. Message Translation “What did he say? Tell it to me, all of it. Don’t suppress or soften one word, as God is your judge! I want it all, word for word as he said it to you”.

Eli's faith started to be rekindled as he came to believe that the Lord was speaking to Samuel; this is how it should be... but it isn't always!

This week let Samuel's simple and profound prayer be said by us often, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening". Keep a paper notebook or notebook app at hand. **AMEN**