

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 18, 2009
1 Samuel 3:1-10

“Just Listening”

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

The words of our theme for this day could very well be the reply of an exasperated teenager these days with earplugs in his or her ears plugged into an Ipod or MP3 player. “Just listening” Such a reply could as well lead to an equally exasperated parent or teacher saying, “Take those things out of your ears and just listen to me!” But how many of us are “just listening” as well. We have a radio or even the television on in the background as we go about our everyday tasks. We may be plugged in as well and in the process be out of touch with what is most important. We are “just listening” but to what? Have you thought that God wants us to be just listening to him? We will consider that as we examine the familiar story of the boy Samuel in the Old Testament lesson for this day. May the Lord’s Word instruct and enlighten us by the power of the Spirit.

I. Samuel’s Call

The opening words of the Old Testament lesson for this day set the scene. 1The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions. 2One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. 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. The setting is in the days just before the kings of Israel. It was really a spiritually dark time. Eli, the high priest, was aging and his sons were immoral and dishonest and hardly respectable servants for the Lord’s house. But the Lord had provided a new young servant in the person of Samuel, the son of Elkanah and Hannah, his pious mother, who had presented him to the Lord after her prayer for a son had been answered. Samuel had served in the Lord’s house at Shiloh where the ark of the covenant had found a semi-permanent home during the days of the judges. He was an able assistant to Eli and was faithful in his duties. Things were pretty normal until that night as he slept near the ark of the Lord as the hours moved toward morning. The lamp which was lit in the evening had not yet gone out.

And then it happened: “Samuel!” He most assuredly heard the voice. It could only be one person calling. And accustomed as he was to helping Eli he got up and ran to Eli’s side. “Here I am. You called me.” But Eli tells him, “I did not call. Go back and lie down.” But it happened again: “Samuel!” And the third time: “Samuel!” Each time Samuel went to Eli and finally the old priest realized it was the Lord calling Samuel. And so he said, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” And just as before, the Lord again called, “Samuel, Samuel!” But the text also said that this time the Lord came and stood there. It was not just a voice. And this time the boy was ready and

answered, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

In the verses that follow this lesson, the Lord speaks a word of judgment about Eli's family to Samuel. And in the morning the boy at first reluctantly but finally does tell Eli what the Lord had said. It was the beginning of Samuel's service as prophet and judge of Israel. He would anoint both Saul and David as the first kings of Israel. As the closing verse of this chapter says, "And Samuel's word came to all Israel."

II. Are You Listening?

Now as we might say in good Lutheran fashion, "What does this mean?" Does it mean we should all go home tonight and wait for the Lord to call us by name, to wait for a vision? No, for as the Christmas season just past and the Epiphany season which we have just entered reminds us, God's revelation has now centered in Jesus Christ. As the opening verses of the epistle to the Hebrews says, "In many and various ways God spoke to his people of old through the prophets, but now in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." God has spoken to us in the word of His Son. He speaks to us still in the revealed word of the Holy Scriptures. He speaks to the world in that word as well.

And in that connection the questions must be asked: "Are you just listening?" Or are you really listening? Is anybody listening? We live in a marvelous time. There are more copies of the Bible in print today than in all other times put together. The Bible is available on the Internet and on computer disk. The words of God are read and preached and proclaimed on radio and television. But are we listening? Really listening?

In the epistle lesson for this morning, the Apostle Paul speaks of the horrible effects of sexual immorality on individuals. He writes, we are not our own. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. These are words to be heeded in a society where sexual permissiveness and immorality are almost the norm. They need to be heard in a time when unmarried mothers are the majority of births in many places. The biblically mandated order of marriage needs to be strengthened but for that to happen people must hear the word of God.

In just a few days, the new administration will take office in Washington. In our prayers today we will pray for President-elect Obama and his administration that the Lord would guide and direct him. But if you have been listening to many people recently, there is an almost unhealthy expectation of the glorious age we are about to enter. The media is enthralled. But our new president needs to listen as well. Not to the multitudes of voices in this post-Christian era demanding this or asking for that. He needs to listen to the quiet, still but unmistakable voice of the Lord in His Word. Let us all pray for all our leaders that they may hear the Lord's word and do His will.

Listen for the Word of Grace

But God speaks something else as well that we need to hear. God speaks his love. God calls us to be his own. God speaks our name just as he spoke Samuel's name. He does it in our baptism. He calls us to be his own. In the Gospel for today, Jesus calls Philip and Nathanael

to follow him. They follow indeed as Nathanael confesses, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel." Please permit here a few personal words. Most of you know that a little over a week ago, my father was called home by the Lord. For those of you who knew him as a professor and pastor of the church, you would be aware that he personified the spirit of our text in his life. He truly knew what it meant to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant listens." It was his good Lord who called him home. The Lord Jesus calls us as well through his word to follow Him. He calls us as the servant of God who went through death itself for us. He calls us as our Savior from sin, death, and the power of the devil. "By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also." So St. Paul writes in the Epistle for today. And that is our joy and hope and our comfort. When we are listening we should hear those words from our Lord as well.

And how do we hear? We hear when we take his words to heart. When we "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them" as the old prayer said so well. Above all, we listen when we gather in worship with our fellow believers, when we are fed and strengthened by the Word and in the Holy Sacrament of His body and blood. We listen when we join in praise and worship to our God. We may spend a lot of time talking about those who do not worship regularly. And it is true that they need to be invited and encouraged. But let us also give thanks on this day for the faithful who listen to the voice of the Lord. The Lord has called us by the Gospel. He invites us to follow Him. We are his own, as much as the boy Samuel discovered on that night. We are just listening. The Lord knows our name as well. And we can only say, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

And so we pray,

Oh, what blessing to be near You
And to listen to Your voice;
Let me ever love and hear You,
Let Your Word be now my choice!
Many hardened sinners, Lord
Flee in terror at Your Word,
But to me, who knows my burden
Show me now Your Word of pardon!

Lord, Your words are waters living
When my thirsting spirit pleads
Lord Your words are bread life giving
On your words my spirit feeds.
Lord, Your words will be my light.
Through death's vale, it dreary night
Yes, they are my sword prevailing
And my cup of joy unfailing.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.