

Epiphany 2

January 15, 2012

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thine eyes, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen...

*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.*

There is always a certain melancholy that comes over me when the Christmas decorations start to come down.

Can you relate to that feeling?

The lights and tree brighten up our home and everything seems so joyful and festive, but then the New Year celebrations come, the last bowl game is played and life carries on.

As the joyful seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany fade away, folks get back to their school and work routines.

My children always get upset with me, for continuing to play Christmas Carols in the car and I tell them that while Epiphany might be over, it is still Christmas with Andy Williams inside my Toyota.

It is easy to see why we love the Christmas and Epiphany seasons so much. In one dramatic moment, God announces good news to a weary world.

It is a time, as I said in my Christmas sermon, when God chose to come into an imperfect world, under imperfect circumstances, to imperfect people, to remind us that we are loved by our creator and this birth gives us an opportunity to make a new start.

And on an intellectual level I know that, despite the fact we put away the jingle bells and Christmas lights, the good news of the Savior's birth does not end after the twelve days of Christmas.

As a church we still have good news to share with our world, even if we don't quite feel up the task emotionally.

Keeping the 'Spirit of Christmas' alive, trying to hear God's voice, cutting through the din of noise and clutter that make up our present world, can be hard work.

Traffic on I-285 never makes me feel very festive or Christ-like.

Like many of you, I am guilty of losing the voice of Christmas as we move deeper into the dark and cold of winter.

I wonder sometimes if the shepherds that returned to their flocks felt the same way.

They met the angels on that first Christmas night and they practically ran to Bethlehem to see this newborn babe.

Yet they had to go back to their fields; the sheep still smelled, wolves still prowled around the outer edges of the field.

They must have found themselves asking the same question. Could they still hear that voice? Could they still hear God's voice in the stillness of that silent night?

We are creatures that respond well to visual and aural stimulation. We love the scent of pine trees, the sight of candles burning in the window, and the sounds of carols.

Take those things away from us and we struggle. We struggle to realize that God's voice is still there for us to hear and God is waiting for our response.

In this morning's Old Testament lesson, we hear a wonderful account of a young man, the prophet Samuel learning what it means to be able to listen to God's voice.

Samuel will grow to be a towering figure in the history of Israel; a man who anoints Kings, someone who the people listen to when the chips are down and Israel's enemies appear to have the upper hand.

But at this point in his life, Samuel doesn't appear to be much of a threat to anybody.

He's a young boy, tending the fire in the temple next of the Ark of the Covenant, watching as Eli's sons abuse their power as God's priests; stealing money, and taking advantage of women.

How does this insignificant boy learn to listen and responds to God's voice.

This morning's story gives us some insight into how he learns to hear God speaking to him, and I believe that if we study the story carefully, we too can do a better job of hearing God's voice, even when the lights and tinsel come down.

Scripture sets the scene by telling us that visions were rare and God's voice was rarely heard around the year 1000 B.C. In other words, Samuel's times were a lot like our time.

Greed, consumption, the lust for power, the worship of success; these things were the idols that folks worshipped.

In our story, God recognizes something promising about Samuel. He may not have appeared much of a threat to the status quo, but God chooses to speak to him. God calls out to him in the middle of the night, "Samuel, Samuel..."

Samuel thinks it is Eli, the old priest, calling out to him. He runs into his master's room and says, "Here I am for you called me".

But Eli tells him that he did not call and sends him back to the temple.

This happens a second time, and a third time before Eli realizes that it is God that is calling out to Samuel.

The old priest tells the young boy that the next time he hears the voice he is simply to say, "Speak Lord for your servant is listening".

Unlike the angels heralding the birth of the Messiah, good news for God's people, the voice that Samuel's hears tells him that God is

going to execute judgment against Eli and his sons for their abuse of their power and their corruption of God's temple.

In the morning, Eli tells Samuel to give him the words that God spoke, and as difficult as it must have been, Samuel speaks the truth to Eli and does not try and sugar coat the words that he heard.

This event represents a turning point in Samuel's life. Scripture tells us that from then on his words did not fall to the ground.

In other words, when Samuel spoke it had meaning, his words had authenticity. Folks knew that Samuel was a prophet that folks could count on.

Samuel's words did not fade away like the promises of politicians.

The people acknowledged that Samuel knew how to listen to God and they believed that this man spoke God's word.

So what does this story teach us this morning about being able to hear God's word in our own lives? We can draw three lessons from this wonderful story.

First, it is important to note that Samuel had to depend on someone else to point out to him that it was God speaking.

Samuel misses out three times on realizing that it is God's voice.

We can sometimes become so busy and so preoccupied that we need someone else's help to tell us to slow down; to pause and find time for God.

Listening for God's voice might start with listening to the voice of our friends and loved ones.

It might mean listening to people who know us best, and know when we are missing something that is right in front of our eyes.

Last week, I attended the funeral of a priest in Cincinnati who sponsored me for seminary. Jim, like most of us, had his share of faults, but the best gift he ever gave to me was his believing in my vocation.

When lots of other folks tried to discourage me from attending seminary, but Jim was the one individual who believed in me. That recognition, that affirmation in my call as a priest, was something I will never forget.

Second, God is persistent. God does not give up when Samuel keeps missing God's voice.

He returns to him. He continues to reach out to Samuel. He calls out to Samuel over and over again.

This is a simple truth about God that many of us can find hard to grasp. God doesn't give up on us, even when we may at times give up on ourselves.

We all can get depressed at times, feeling defeated by the ups and downs of human life, but God will never give up on us.

And finally, what else do we learn about listening to God's voice from this Old Testament story?

Sometimes we have to hear information that may not be pleasant.

Samuel has to let his mentor know that God is going to take action against Eli and his sons.

Sometimes, that voice may remind us as a church we are called to be advocates for those who are poor, marginalized or without power in our society.

It may not be comfortable, but as a priest once told me, “John your job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

In our lives as Christians, together as part of this community, we need to let God’s voice not only announce good news to us, but also let that voice make us all a bit uncomfortable.

This morning I want to invite you to let God’s voice challenge you; to not be content with the way things are, but strive to be a better advocate for those who need God’s love and our church’s support.

God’s still speaks to us this morning even when the decorations come down and I stop listening to that Andy Williams CD.

God speaks to you, and he speaks to me, and may God find all of us waiting and willing to listen to what God needs to say.

AMEN