

To See and Hear

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

1 Samuel 3:1-10



Last week I read an article in the New York Times that started with these words: “Every Sunday, just after dawn, while much of the city sleeps, a group of men gather on the overgrown lawn of a public park in a quiet neighborhood in the capital of Suriname, South America’s smallest country. They huddle together, and hush.”

And so I was introduced to the national pastime of this country with a population of half a million people – birdsong competitions. Each of the men has a cage containing one songbird, and for the next several hours, they will sit absolutely still and focused, silent as the birds sing and the referees rate each performance on a chalkboard. These competitions are broadcast on national television, with the entire country pausing, leaning close to their televisions, and listening.

As the writer notes, this is a competition closer to meditation than to the adrenaline-fueled sports that galvanize other nations, and they would not have it any other way, calling it a way of life.

Apparently, they spend years training the birds to sing on cue and training themselves on how to listen, to pick up the nuances of bird song.

As I read, knowing the text for today, I could not stop imagining that scene in the temple – old Eli, his eyesight fading, a manifestation of the failed priestly line; and young Samuel, his eyesight fine, but not yet trained in how to listen; both going to bed in a temple consecrated to a God whose word was rare in those days.

I am left to wonder if the narrator means that God had stopped speaking in those days, keeping God’s word closed off to the people or if he means that God was speaking, but the people, as a people, had forgotten how to listen.

Is the rarity of God’s word a kind of punishment? After all, we know from the text that Eli’s children are corrupt and that the people of Israel has gone down the path of idolatry, locating their security in people and things other than God. We know that during

Samuel's lifetime, the people will clamor for a human king like all the other nations, even though Samuel warns them that God alone is their king. So, could it be that God is punishing them by shutting God's mouth, keeping the word away from them? I suppose.

But what is it, I wonder, that sends us down those well-worn paths of idolatry? Is it not possible that the gold and money they began to hoard, the frenetic buying and selling that comes along with it, the chasing after power, the displacement of the temple from the center of living to other spaces – could it be that this has dulled the people's senses, rendering them unable to hear properly the God who is always speaking, whose word was perhaps rare because it was not listened to?

I do not know for sure. But I do know what I saw in our Courtyard a few weeks ago. We were gathered for worship. It was chilly, not as cold as last Sunday but chilly. The carillon began to play in worship, and we were all dutifully listening to it like good Presbyterians, with our heads down. At least that is what I was doing. And I cannot remember what caused me to look up, but I did. What I saw was an array of Presbyterians looking down, and one Presbyterian who had not gotten the memo. She was looking up. Maybe she was seeing the white clouds passing overhead, or one of the birds that shot out of a tree, or sunlight reflecting off the rooftop. I do not know. But what struck me in that one moment was how expectant she looked, as if she just knew if she paid attention, something was going to happen.

I have tried to be better since then about taking advantage of worshiping as a community in this outdoor sanctuary, noticing those moments of beauty that add to worship. But even more, I have been trying to walk through my days with my head up, so to speak, paying attention when it is so tempting to finish the to-do list, rush to the next event, accumulate that one more thing, hurry up a conversation, and otherwise fence off my soul from the word of God that is always speaking.

Old Eli and the boy Samuel help. When God speaks, Samuel, even though he is the chosen prophet of God, has trouble hearing. He hears well enough, but he does not yet know how to discern, how to know the voice of God from the other voices around him. But God is patient. And Eli, while he may be on the way out the door and his eyesight may be dim, he does at last remember how to discern, and is courageous enough to recognize God's word is not coming to him, but to the boy. And so, together, they hear in the way they can, and Eli empowers the boy to say, "Here I am."

Eli and Samuel are wise companions for us. They remind us that discernment, listening for God in the world, is not a solitary task. We need one another. That is one blessing of being Presbyterian. Sure, we bemoan meeting after meeting – committees and

task forces and the Session. We sometimes wonder if we can make it through another class with that person who reads the Bible differently than we do, or whose politics do not jibe with ours, or who prays differently than we do. We come to worship declaring that if we have to sing that God-awful hymn again, or if the organ gets too loud for our taste, or if the preacher says something we don't agree with, or if, God-forbid, someone sits in our pew, well, we will just stay home, knowing, in our heart of hearts that we won't.

Why? Because we need each other. Together, by God's grace, we are listening together for the will and way of God. The days we are in are hard, the decisions we make will determine the shape of our living as a church and as individuals in a world reeling from pandemic and division. It is easy for us to look out on the conditions around us and declare, "The word of the Lord is rare in these days."

Well, maybe it is. But if it is, it is not because God is silent. It is because we need to attend to listening, together, for the way God is even now opening among us of peace, of transformative grace, of justice and love.

God is not silent. So let us commit this day to taking a cue from our friends in Suriname, and our brothers Eli and Samuel. Let us look up, look around, and listen – through prayer, through Scripture, through worship, through conversation, through a walk in the woods or the neighborhood – for the God who is not silent but comes to us even now. Let us answer in every way, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." Amen.