

“TO LISTEN IS TO OBEY”
I Samuel 3:1-20
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 18, 2015

Last Sunday the theme of the sermon based on the scripture of Jesus’ baptism was that the believer is baptized into Christ’s Pascal mystery. That means your old self is crucified with Christ so that your true self, the real you, can be raised up with Christ. Just as Christ’s baptism was his ordination to Christship, your baptism is your ordination to discipleship. However, baptism alone does not guarantee salvation. You must choose, by your own free will, how you will respond. So the question is, when God calls you to deny yourself, your self-centeredness, your desire to go your own way, are you really listening and then, will you follow? You see, Jesus calls you to set aside your personal agenda so you can be actively involved in God’s plan for your life.

I know there are many folks uncomfortable with the concept of God having a preordained plan for your life. They believe the notion “God has a plan” somehow means you are preprogrammed, you have no say in your destiny. They prefer to believe “I am the captain of my soul and the master of my fate.” I can sympathize because it’s scary losing control. But I ask you, when is anybody ever in control? Even Frank Sinatra must have realized deep down when he crooned, “I did it my way,” that even his way was mostly out of control. That’s why it takes courageous faith to intentionally surrender control. Why? You have no guarantees things will turn out the way you want, but when you yield to God’s mysterious ways you are promised no matter what happens, no matter how bad things get, God always loves you, God is always with you and God always empowers you to live under the protection of his grace and authority.

This morning’s scripture is a story about God calling young Samuel to a life of faith and practice. Note the words “faith and practice.” You are not just called to believe in God. That’s the easy part. You are especially called to put into practice what you believe. You can’t listen to a sermon exhorting you to love your neighbor, tell the preacher, “That was a good sermon,” and then go out and kick your neighbor in the teeth. You can’t read Jesus’ words, “Follow me,” and then go off and do what you want to do.

Have you ever noticed that when you read those calling stories in the Bible many times the one being called resists the invitation?

Take Moses for instance. God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush. Moses had no doubt he was talking to God. But when God called on Moses to go back to Egypt to liberate the Hebrews from slavery Moses hemmed and hawed. Remember his excuses? “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh...?” Then Moses said, “But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me?” (Exodus 4:1) And his final excuse, “O my Lord I have never been eloquent...but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue...” (Exodus 4:10)

You get the picture. Moses was reluctant. “Gee Lord, I’m honored you thought of me, but I’m really not your man.” Ever wonder why Moses begged off, I mean besides being frightened by the challenge? Here’s my guess. Moses was leading a “comfy” life. He married the boss’s daughter and was doing very well. He knew what it was like back in Egypt and he didn’t want to go back. Can you blame him? In our time and place we don’t fault refugees living in our communities after running away from oppression. We welcome them.

Back in the 1930’s a German pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a refugee from Hitler’s Germany. He settled in New York City and taught at the prestigious Union Seminary. He too had a nice life. The Christian community in America embraced him. No one faulted him for running away from the Nazis. But Bonhoeffer struggled with his conscience. He began to sense he needed to go back to be with the German Christians and witness against Hitler and, if need be, suffer with those being persecuted.

Like Moses, Bonhoeffer was being called by God to leave the good life behind and go be with his people. Like Moses I’m sure he had many arguments with God. I also wonder if both of these men also had conversations with friends and families begging them to stay. No one would have thought less of them if they did. But instead of listening to other voices, they listened to the one voice that mattered. They listened and obeyed.

Have you been in their shoes? All of a sudden you are being challenged to break ranks and do something extraordinary and you really don’t want to. God is calling you to fulfill your destiny, and you want no part of it. So you get preoccupied with substitute projects, maybe if God sees you’re busy doing your thing, he’ll leave you alone. You try to block out God’s still small voice, maybe you stop praying because you want to avoid the subject. Maybe after a while God gets off your back and goes bother someone else. (That’s what happens, if God wants you to accomplish something and you refuse, he’ll go around you.) You may be off the hook, but will you regret it the rest of your life?

There’s an old hymn that begins, “Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide.” My experience tells me “it” happens more than once, in fact “it” happens every day. God calls you to faithful living. You are called to love God, and let God love you. You are invited to participate in the full, abundant life. You are empowered to take risks and make sacrifices. You know what I’m talking about. You hear that voice, calling you in the night, calling you by name. God is saying, “I want you to become more like my son Jesus, I want you to know the joy of Christian service, to learn how to really love the people I bring into your life.

So far I’ve been talking about what it means to be called and the struggle and consequences of accepting your call.

For the rest of the sermon I want you to consider the concept of discerning and listening and learning to tell the difference between God’s voice and all those other voices that confuse and distract. Remember Moses’ and Bonhoeffer’s dilemma. God

called them to go back, friends and family begged them to stay. How do you tell the difference, what voice belongs to God?

First you must perfect for yourself the fine art of listening. Who is really calling you in the night?

When the Lord repeatedly called, “Samuel, Samuel,” it wasn’t until the third time and with Eli’s help that Samuel was able to recognize God’s voice.

“Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening’.” (I Samuel 3:8-9)

Here we can see God’s timing at work. The Lord called Samuel when Eli was available to help Samuel recognize who was speaking to him. This should tell you something. If you are going to grow in your faith and practice you need to be in Christian Community. Samuel needed Eli’s wisdom and insight so he could begin to recognize and then listen to God’s voice.

God doesn’t always hit you on the head when he wants to get your attention. Then again sometimes God does hit you on the head and you still don’t pay attention, so he makes available someone older and wiser to show you the way.

Listen again to what Eli said to Samuel. “Go lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening’.” (I Samuel 3:10)

Go lie down, be still, be attentive, be open to the probability that the Lord’s still small voice may be speaking to you personally. God doesn’t speak only to mystics and prophets God speaks to everybody, including you. Are you listening?

Needless to say, listening is hard, because you need to give up control, and if you’re afraid of what you might hear, it feels unsafe to relinquish control.

You’ve heard the saying, “Be careful for what you pray for.” Listening is part of prayer. You speak, God responds or God speaks and you respond.

When God called you to be in a relationship with him through his son Jesus, if and when you said “Yes” you really didn’t know what you were signing up for. But as you grow in your faith you grow in your practice. You realize God is slowly but surely expecting more and more from you just as your mom and dad expected you to assume more responsibility as you grew older. And part of assuming more responsibility entails hard and honest listening and being willing to give up control. No more doing it my way. Now you do it God’s way.

What is God calling you to do today? What bad habit does God want you to give up? What new habit does God want you to take on? How is God asking you to give up

control of your life so God can use you in his unfolding plan for your life? Let me be clear. God is speaking, right now. The question is, are you listening hard, and when you hear will you obey?

In two weeks we hold our annual meeting. You will hear my report on how I see the state of our church, you will receive information on the state of our finances and you will hear reports on what's happening with our various programs and ministries.

Please remember this is Christ's church. You and I are here, active in this faith community, because God called you to be here. So while you are processing all the reports and information during our annual meeting, be alert, listen hard for God calling you to the next level of faith and practice. Be willing to ask the hard questions and as you listen for God's voice, speaking to you, calling you to stretch your faith and increase your practice, keep in mind this important truth, "to listen is to obey."