“***God is Calling Us***”

***I Samuel 3:1-10; I Thessalonians 5:12-23*** February 7, 2021

 This week, I ran across an interesting bit about worship in America back at the turn of the 18th century. Back then, one of the members of the church was appointed to be what’s known as the tithingman. Now a tithingman’s role had nothing to do with money or stewardship whatsoever. During worship back then, the tithingman would sit at a desk right in front of the pulpit. From there, the tithingman would stare out into the congregation, focusing on their faces, looking to make sure everyone was awake during the three plus hour sermon.

 If his eyes should happen upon somebody drowsing off during the sermon, the tithingman would rise, grabbing hold of a large pole. Now this large pole had two ends. On one side it had big, hard knob on the end of it. And so, if the tithingman saw some man or some boy nod off, he’d pick up his pole, walk down the aisle and poke the man or boy on the back of the head to wake him up. In the case of women or girls who fell asleep, well, they got off a little bit easier. For them tithingman used the other end of his pole, which usually had a rabbit’s foot or a fox tail or a feather on it, and he’d wave that in their face to tickle them awake.

 Now we’re all probably glad that at some point the role of the tithingman went the way of the dodo. And I don’t really think we’d need one here. It’s been my experience as your preacher over the last year that very seldom, if ever, have I seen anyone completely zonked out. I’d like to take that as a credit to myself but I think it’s far more likely that you are all just a faithful group, willing to hear the word of God no matter how it’s conveyed.

 But I think we’d all agree that there’s a difference sometimes between hearing and really listening to what’s being said. If we’re honest with ourselves, we all recognize that sometimes we may well hear things from time to time and yet still not be actively listening. And I’m not merely applying that to church life. I think more broadly that it’s just somehow part of our human nature to hear what we want to hear, instead of really actively, deeply listening.

 Take for example a recent event that happened several years back in my household. You see, even though I lived in Mount Holly for years, it took me a while to switch my voter registration from Charlotte. Poised to vote for the first time ever in Mount Holly, I told Natalie that I was planning on stopping by our precinct. *She informed me precisely where I needed to vote.*

 Ah but you know, somehow caught up in the excitement of voting for the first time here in Mount Holly, I listened to her, but I didn’t really hear what she said. I just assumed she told me what I assumed to be true - that our precinct was the Tuckaseegee Center, located less than a mile as the crow flies from our home at the time.

 Imagine my surprise when I got there to discover, no, I couldn’t vote there, that I needed to go to the right precinct, the very one my dear wife told me about days before. She’d told me I needed to go to the Wesleyan church. I’d heard her words but I really hadn’t listened.

 In today’s reading from the Old Testament, we encounter a great story about hearing that takes some time to move to active listening. God speaks, Samuel hears, and yet it takes repetition for him to really listen to who’s speaking to him.

 I Samuel 3 begins: “*the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.*”

 To be sure, these were dark days, in the land of milk and honey. In the preceding pages of First Samuel, we’ve learned an awful lot about Hophni and Phineas, the priest Eli’s sons. You see, Hophni and Phineas, were, like their father, priests of the one true God. But unlike old Eli, these two had their hearts set on themselves and not the Lord. Case in point - they wrongly took the best portions of the offerings. One had even created a giant trident so that the first forkful of food to which the priest was entitled to wouldn’t be a dainty bite but rather a gargantuan hunk leaving nothing left for others.

 And looking at the history of the era, we know it wasn’t just them. In fact, it was far more likely that they were a reflection of the culture which surrounded them rather than exceptions to everyday people.

 The twelve Hebrew tribes had settled in the Promised Land, but things looked anything but promising. After the death of Joshua, the tribes were besieged from the outside by enemies like the Moabites, Midianites, and Canaanites. Presently, the Philistines were multiplying in number and in power, and they were masters of the region.

 But the Hebrew tribes didn’t just have to contend with outside enemies; they also had to deal with internal discord. The tribes were bickering among themselves. What’s worse, many were chasing after Canaanite gods, and their disobedience and infidelity brought bitter consequences. Things would get so bad that from time to time the people would cry out to God for help, and God would raise up a leader to straighten things out. But once things got better, the Hebrew people would fall back to their old, rebellious ways where all the people did what was right in their own eyes. They might hear the word of God, but they sure weren’t listening to what He was actually saying.

 The Scripture tells us that the word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread. That the people *were living in dark times.*

 You know, I had a great conversation with someone just the other day about how our present times look. We both agreed that things seemed pretty dark as we considered the myriad ways in which this confluence of technology and intense drift towards individualism are making us ever-less human, ever-more focused on ourselves and not the greater community in which we live.

 But thankfully, that’s where the Good News begins for us as well as for Samuel. You see the fundamental witness of these first verses of our reading this morning makes a broader statement than we may initially realize. And what it teaches us is this – *Even in the darkest of times, God is still speaking*. This is a God who will not be silenced. This is a God who communicates with his people regardless of the world in which they’re presently situated.

 We can take great comfort in that. We can be sure that no matter what the evening news report may tell us that God in the power of the Holy Spirit is still speaking, still communicating with His people. Closer to home, we can be certain that no matter what darkness surrounds our individual lives, that God is now and always will be calling for us by name.

 And that’s exactly what he does with young Samuel. Into this cauldron of brokenness and chasing after false Gods, God interjects his divine speech. And maybe because it’s so dark there in the Temple, both literally and figuratively, that Samuel doesn’t quite understand. Maybe it’s that God has seemingly been so silent for so long that when he does finally speak, Samuel just can’t believe it to be the Almighty One. In fact, he assumes the speech to be emanating from Eli.

 I think that same dynamic can happen in our lives as well. Sometimes, when we’re so thoroughly caught up in our lives, we forget that God could, and probably is, communicating with us. Perhaps there’s just too much white noise with the incessant droning of our televisions and computers and the beeping and buzzing of our cell phones that listening for the still small voice of the Lord of our God becomes a nearly impossible thing to do.

 And then, after living a prolonged time in that self-imposed deafness, when God’s word does finally come crashing through the white noise of our lives, EVEN THEN, we can’t quite imagine that it’s truly Him speaking to us.

 Hearing a strange new voice speaking to us, we don’t quite know what to do. So, we look to other things. We think perhaps we’re being called to work harder at our jobs or be better parents or make more money. We hear, but aren’t listening, just like Samuel does here in our passage of Scripture.

 Not quite believing the word of God to be falling upon his ears, Samuel makes what’s the most likely, probable deduction. He assumes – It must be Eli that’s talking to him. So, he scurries off to search out his older, wiser master. But lo and behold, even Eli doesn’t quite realize what’s going on yet either.

 And I think this can be true in a broader sense as well. Sometimes even the people of God, called to be ministers and priests can sometimes not quite understand what’s being said by an always speaking God. And what I mean by that is this – that we within the professional priestly class can be hearing and yet not quite listening as well.

 I’ve certainly experienced this effect in my own life and as I look at the parade of years, clear examples can be seen in history. Some priests heard the word of God about slavery and yet listened only to what they wanted to hear, fighting against abolition. Again, more recently, we look back to some dark days in the 50’s and 60’s when a great many mainline clergy people fought vociferously *against* civil rights.

 Because all priests and ministers of the Lord our God are human, just like Eli, they aren’t excluded from the dynamic of hearing but not really listening for what’s being said.

 But thanks be to God, the story doesn’t end there. It doesn’t end with Eli wrongly interpreting the voice of God. It certainly doesn’t end with Samuel and Eli both going back to sleep and forgetting all about a strange voice calling in the night.

 After being rebuffed by his spiritual mentor, Samuel returns to his quiet slumber only to be awakened yet again by the calling of the Lord God. And yet again, the process repeats itself seeing Samuel run to inquire of Eli.

 Here we get the second great piece of Good News revealed in this passage. *God is persistent in his calling*.

 You see, for those who are elect in Christ, God keeps coming back, keep calling over and over again. God never gives up. What that means is that there isn’t some point at which God just throws up his hands and says, “well, clearly so-and-so is never going to really hear what I’m saying so I’ll turn my attention elsewhere and just plain give up on them.”

 Personally, I thank God about this amazing, divine persistence, especially as it relates to call. By all accounts, I’m rather hard-headed. And as I look back over my life and think about the numerous occasions and events when God was very clearly and directly speaking, calling me to Him only to find his words heard but hot listened to I’m deeply grateful for this persistence.

 Perhaps the most egregious example of this came as I debated whether to go into ministry. One day I was driving down 127 just about to turn onto Tuckaseegee road. The entire drive home from my seminary classes, I was pondering my future. Could God really be calling me to be a minister? Me? I knew it just couldn’t be.

 Well, as I approached the traffic light at Tuckaseegee road, I decided that what I really needed was some kind of sign, some kind of divine assurance that this was indeed God’s path for me. So, I turn the corner, drive a little bit down the road and lo and behold, what should be cresting up over Tuckaseegee Baptist Church but a most amazing rainbow. But it wasn’t just that it was a rainbow, it was how out of place it was. The sun was shining brightly and it didn’t look at all like rain had been in the area in weeks.

 But there it was. A rainbow over a church just when I asked for a sign. Boom. Case closed, right? Couldn’t be any louder or clearer.

 Well, I’d love to tell you that that very moment marked the end of my deafness when it came to listening for God’s call. It wasn’t. I kept on struggling with it. God had spoken, I had heard but I hadn’t really listened for what he was saying.

 Thankfully, God keeps on working on all of us just like he worked with Samuel.

 A third time the word of the Lord came to him. A third time this young man went back to his spiritual mentor. Ah, but this time, God’s persistence paid off. Eli recognized what was going on. The rest, as they say is history. Samuel becomes a great prophet of the Lord. He anoints Israel’s First King. When that king fails, it’s Samuel who seeks out David and sets the course of Israel’s history headed directly towards Jesus Christ.

 I remember hearing that it was sometime in the 1930’s the Royal Canadian Mounted Police were afforded a most welcome and comforting epithet. The stories about how it all happened may differ but there, sometime in the 30’s, it became standard to say that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police “always get their man.”

 God is like that with us.

 And as I thought about it, I realized that the Lord our God is like a divine tithingman. Maybe he sees us drift off to sleep in our self-induced deafness. Soon, he tickles our noses, striving to wake us from our reverie. Maybe finding that to be too light a touch, who knows, maybe he whacks us on the back of our heads until we’re forced to hear his call.

 But in it all, there is Grace and Love. Because we are his, because we are chosen and claimed by him to live the fullness of life here and into the hereafter, God goes to any length to get us both to hear and to really listen to what he’s saying.

 To answer the question that I raised in the title of the sermon – “Is God calling you?” Yes. He is. Most assuredly He is.

 Are we ready to listen to what he’s saying?

 In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.