

Are You Listening?

In the name of him who calls us by name saying, “Follow me”, dear friends in Christ: Today’s Old Testament lesson contains what is surely one of the saddest passages in the Bible: “The Word of the Lord was rare in those days”. I can’t imagine anything much worse. Here’s that specially chosen people, Israel, a nation created, redeemed from slavery, defended from her enemies, and sustained in every need solely by the Word of the Lord – and in the days referred to, the Lord wasn’t talking to them. The lamp of God in the temple that symbolized the enlightenment of his truth hadn’t *quite* gone out yet; but it was flickering and dimming. The divine light, the source of the nation’s very life was failing, just like the eyesight of its aged high priest, Eli. For lack of the illumination of God’s Word the entire nation was with him being plunged into darkness.

It sounds pretty bad, doesn’t it? But recognizing that the Old Testament nation of Israel is a picture of the church of our day, it’s safe to say that the description given then applies even now; that is to say, *the Word of the Lord is rare in these days*. You might wonder how I can say that when more Bibles have been printed than any other book in history and it consistently remains a best-seller year after year. Why, it seems that God’s Word is everywhere. It’s in churches all over the world. It’s on radio, television, and the internet. Almost everyone has at least one Bible in their home. You can even find one in just about every hotel room. It sure doesn’t sound like the Word of the Lord is rare. But it is, because these days, as it was back in ancient Israel, the problem has nothing to do with the quantity of God’s Word that’s out there; rather the Word is rare because so very few people are listening to it.

Today in most mainline liberal Christian churches (both Protestant and Catholic), the Word of the Lord has been all but snuffed out. It’s discredited, “demythologized”, and even damned by some as being primitive, sexist, and barbaric. And these are churches that claim to bear the name of Christ. Oh, sometimes they pay lip service to the Scriptures. They’ll refer to passages now and then. Specifically they’ll do it to quote a passage that seems to support what they want to say, and they’ll mention well known passages that go against the ideas they want to promote – but only to explain either why the words don’t mean what they very clearly do or why you don’t need to pay attention to them anymore. What you’re far more likely to hear in these churches though, are inspirational stories designed to make you feel good and affirm your self image. Or, on the other side, to make you feel bad so you’ll give more money or pitch in to help with some cause they’re pushing. What will be carefully avoided is any talk of your personal sin, and consequently, your need for God’s grace and forgiveness in the Savior Jesus Christ. And sadly, there’s always steady pressure on faithful churches that hold God’s Word in high regard to stop swimming against the current and go with the flow, so that as time goes on, no matter how many Bibles they print, the Word of the Lord becomes increasingly rare.

How did it come to this? How is it that even though God’s Word is almost everywhere so few people are listening to it? Today’s reading about the call of Samuel and the story that surrounds it sheds light on the subject, revealing at least three ways in which the Word of the Lord becomes scarce because the people who have it fail to listen to it. So, let’s take a look:

Phinehas and Hophni were brothers. Through their father, Eli, they were direct descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses, who was the first High Priest of Israel. Because the position was hereditary, when Eli died, one of them would become the High Priest of the

Lord. Because of that, they had been groomed and prepared with studies in God's Word from their youth. They were probably some of the best trained theologians of their day. And now, because their father was quite old and growing blind, they had picked up most of his duties in the temple. They were like his right and left hands.

The trouble was that Phinehas and Hophni were extremely corrupt and wicked men. They had rejected the Word of the Lord. Oh, they knew what it said – they just didn't fear the Lord who said it and for that reason saw no need to apply it to their own lives – except, that is, when it was to their advantage. You see, they liked the idea of being priests well enough. It was a fairly soft and prestigious job with decent pay and nice perks. But they used their positions and power in ungodly ways. They robbed from the sacrifices people brought to the Lord, and they engaged in illicit sexual relations with the women who served around the temple in various capacities. None of this was a secret. Their corrupt practices and flagrant disregard for God's Word were widely known. It was a national scandal. Worse, because everyone knew they were mishandling the sacrifices, it called into question the whole process by which the Lord forgave peoples' sins. Think of it this way: no matter how faithful a person you might be, you had to entrust the sacrifice you brought to the Lord to these two scoundrels. You walked away wondering if your sacrifice would be offered up to God for your sins, or maybe sold in the market to enrich the priests, or served up on their dinner tables. And if its blood were not shed for you properly in accordance with the Law of Moses, where did that leave you with respect to your sin? Were you forgiven or not? How would you like to live with that kind of uncertainty: your immortal soul in danger and nothing you can do about it? Beyond that, there was the example they were setting for the nation. If the priests of God had thrown away the laws concerning theft and sexual morality, it was a sure thing they couldn't preach them to the rest of the people. Even if they did, their actions preached a louder message than their words.

So you can well imagine the impact of all this on Israel. Things deteriorated rapidly until they became, well, pretty much like they are today. It comes of rejecting God's Word and not fearing his wrath against sin. And you may think, "Yes, but that couldn't happen in our church today." No? I know a young pastor whose first call was to an LCMS church in North Dakota—a place where folks are known to be quite conservative. After the installation, the elders pulled him aside and said, "Look here, Pastor; in this congregation we have four couples who are living together and not married. They're related to just about everyone in the church, and we don't want any trouble. So, here's the deal: the first time you speak against that sort of thing in a sermon or Bible study, you're finished here. You can pack your bags and go. Do you understand?" Now here are people who claim to be solid Christians and know what God says; but they say they don't want to hear it. And if a pastor can't confront his flock with their sin, how can they come to repentance and be assured of God's forgiveness? This situation is far from unique. There are plenty of other cases I could cite. But we're talking about people who are not listening to the Word of the Lord by rejecting the parts of it that they don't like. The question before us is: Are you listening? Are there parts of God's Word that you reject and deliberately refuse to hear?

Eli, the High Priest, and the father of Phinehas and Hophni, was a man who had great respect for the Word of the Lord. Even in his old age, he studied it daily. But as much as Eli studied it, he too was not listening to it. How? Through his inaction. It broke Eli's heart to know what his sons were doing. Every day more complaints came in. And he well understood the damage they were doing to the spiritual and moral life of the nation. But he never did anything about it. Acting either in his role as a father, or certainly in his official capacity as High Priest, it was his duty and within his authority to correct them. But he did nothing. The Lord finally sent a prophet to warn Eli of the dire consequences his family would suffer if he did not set his sons

straight. But the best Eli could manage was, once in a while at the dinner table, to weakly wag his finger at his sons and say, [in frail voice, almost apologetically] “Now boys, you really shouldn’t be doing all the terrible things I keep hearing about”, while he helped himself to another stolen sacrificial lamb chop.

Eli was not listening to the Lord’s Word by failing to discharge the sacred responsibilities entrusted to him. Paralyzed by what he incorrectly believed to be love for his sons, and fearful of the damage their relationship might suffer if he came down too hard on them, he allowed the Lord’s worship to become a farce, the spiritual life of the nation to decay, and his own family to be destroyed. If he had really been faithful to the Lord, he would have done whatever was necessary to restore the integrity of the priesthood. And if he had really loved his sons, he would have done the difficult job of correcting them. But it was so much easier to sit idly by impotently complaining while he avoided a much needed confrontation.

In our day and age we bemoan the fact that even in the church moral standards have been allowed to slide as far as they have. I’ll often hear someone say, “When I was growing up things sure weren’t this way – but these kids today, I just don’t know what’s got into them!” Well, whose fault is that? When we as parents or we collectively as the church fail to speak against sin and neglect to rebuke those who are involved in it, we actually condone the sin and become participants in it. Eli was not listening to the Word of the Lord by failing to act upon it. The question is: Are you listening?

The boy Samuel was probably twelve or thirteen years old when the Lord called him. You may remember the story of his birth: how Hannah, his mother, had been unable to conceive and was heartbroken because of it. She so desperately wanted a child that in prayer she promised to dedicate her child to the service of the Lord if only he would give her a son. God granted her request. And true to her promise, when the time came she dropped him off at the temple. Samuel entered the Lord’s service at the tender age of three or four. He became the personal attendant of Eli; fetching things for him, guiding him around, and later on as the old priest’s eyesight began to fail, even reading to him from the Scripture.

But Samuel was not listening to the Lord. Why not? Because Samuel didn’t know who the Lord was. Strange as it may seem, even in the house of God where he was being raised, he had no personal knowledge of the Lord. Sure, he knew *about* God. He was surrounded by the priests and their rituals and prayers. The worship of God, as corrupt as it was, was still going on before his eyes all the time. But no one ever took the time to explain to young Samuel what it was all about. And why would they? From their perspective he was just an errand boy. Besides, who was going to teach him? Eli, who couldn’t even be bothered to correct his own sons? Surely not Phinehas or Hophni. Samuel couldn’t listen to the Lord because to him the Lord was a stranger. No one had ever bothered to instruct him. So it happened when he actually heard the voice of God, he thought it was just a man speaking. It’s easy to see the progression here. One generation fails to act on the Word of the Lord, the next generation rejects it, and the third grows up not knowing what it is because they don’t know the One who’s speaking.

And what about us? Do we know who’s speaking in God’s Word? We all have one or more of the many Bibles that are being printed every day. We come here to the church and follow along as the Scriptures are read. Do we know who it is that’s speaking to us? Is it just the voice of a man? Is it just another musty passage from an old book? Or is it the voice of the living God that we hear? We know the answer: The Lord is speaking. Every day he’s calling

you by name. He's calling you to an ever more close and rewarding relationship with him through the person of Jesus Christ, his Son. The question is: Are you listening?

This is where it gets uncomfortable, because if we're honest we all have to admit that no, there are plenty of times when we're not listening. There's a part of us that resists that closer relationship the Lord is calling us to. We like our imagined independence and blissful ignorance. A fairly cool, distant relationship with him is safer – about as close as we'd like to get. Besides, knowing the Lord – *really* knowing him – means making radical changes in our lives and taking on responsibilities we'd rather avoid. It means unpleasant confrontation with the sin in our lives and disturbances in our relations with others. So, sad as it is to admit it, on some level, we kind of like keeping the Lord pretty much a stranger. That's not just sad; it's truly frightening. Because those who persistently resist the Lord's overtures in this life and who want to keep him a stranger will be rewarded for all eternity with exactly that: the only thing they will ever know about God is his wrath.

The good news for us is that even though we are often at pains to estrange ourselves from the Lord, he still knows who we are. And he wants us to know him. So he keeps coming back to stand near us like he did for Samuel, and also for Philip, Andrew, Peter, and Nathaniel in today's Gospel lesson. He calls us by name to listen to him and follow him.

And here's the best part: his call, his voice provides what we need to answer him. On our own, we're not capable of doing anything but rejecting the Lord's Word and we are powerless to act on it. The Lord would always remain a stranger to us if it were not for his action. He comes to us to reveal himself through his Word so that we can know him. And contained in his Word is the power of his Holy Spirit to break down our stubborn resistance and give us the will to respond in faith and action. He does this by confronting us with our sin and unbelief, which leads us to repentance. He causes us to confess, "I'm sorry, Lord, that I have made you a stranger; that I've rejected parts of your Word, and failed to do what's right." And then he gives us the comforting words of grace, "Your sins are forgiven. For the sake of Jesus who perfectly listened to his Father, who willfully gave his life for you, and by whose blood you are cleansed, you are free of your guilt. And I have given you the faith and strength to follow. Come walk with me and we'll talk. I want you to know me." He says that to you now. Are you listening?

Today the Lord stands among us with a message from his Word. May his Spirit fill us with the faith to answer him, "Yes, Lord, speak; for your servant is listening." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!