

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
January 18, 2015
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell

Texts – I Samuel 3: 1-10, 19-20 and John 1: 35-51

Once upon a time, when talking to a group in a forum or retreat about how to better hear God's voice, we could use a simple analogy of tuning a radio or television – of getting rid of static. I'm sure that many of you remember, as I do, when radios came with vacuum tubes or transistors. They had round dials or long, narrow scales with a knob for selecting the station. You turned the knob so that the needle came in the general vicinity of the station you wanted, then you wiggled it back and forth until most of the static was gone. Or there might have been a second knob for fine-tuning that would bring you a little closer to clear reception.

Televisions came in black and white. The channel selector had numbers from 1-13, but, at least where I lived, there were no more than 4 or 5 channels. There were knobs for getting rid of pesky horizontal and vertical interference and, maybe, a rabbit ears antenna that you manipulated to get rid of "snow" and "ghosts." Sometimes, you had to put tin foil on the rabbit ears before you could "get the picture."

Modern technology has advanced, though, just to the cusp of providing solutions to all static and interference – crystal clear pictures that are just like seeing a program in person and sound as good as – maybe better than – a live performance. There is cable and satellite, WIFI and streaming. And high definition TV. There is no longer a reason for being unable to receive perfectly clear pictures and sounds – except around Galena's limestone rocks that block the signal altogether so that no amount of fiddling makes any difference. The world and its technology have become more complex. We need another analogy.

We do, of course, have other kinds of static. The static of too much information, too many choices: hundreds of channels, 24/7 programming and social media – so overwhelming that it is hard to filter through the over load to find what is important let alone make sense of it, to quiet ourselves, let all of that go, and listen. And hear.

I often wonder if things were clearer in biblical times. Oh, I know they weren't easier! Whether in the time of Samuel or hundreds of years later for John the Baptist, there was political unrest and social upheaval. Life was harsh, the people were so much more dependent on the land or the sea than we are – or on the whims of enemies or occupying forces. But I wonder if it was easier to have a strong sense of God's presence and to hear when God spoke.

Our Hebrew Scripture reading this morning tells us that wasn't necessarily so--in Samuel's time the word of God was rare and visions were not widespread – no longer like the times of Abraham who regularly talked with God. No burning bushes like Moses encountered. And, indeed, the voice of God in our readings today is not as commanding as we heard last week – the voice that called the world and all its creatures into being. The voice that called out of the torn veil between heaven and earth to affirm Jesus as the beloved. No, the voice of God for Samuel was real, but not immediately recognized. It took some extra help for him to understand what was happening. In this case, Samuel needed another human being to fine-tune, to interpret the message for him.

Imagine young Samuel lying on his mat in the Temple in the wee hours of the night,

so close to the sacred Ark, the lamp flickering, the smells of incense— and probably of sacrificed animals— surrounding him. He sleeps, but with one ear cocked for unexpected sounds in the silence, sounds that would signal some duty that he must perform. In the midst of this silence, I would expect that the voice was clearly heard. And yet, Samuel mistook it for the voice of Eli. Three times. It took Eli, the elderly priest whose vision was fading, to figure it out and translate for the young Samuel who had not yet “known” God and to tell him how to answer, how to *hear*, and even how to speak what he heard.

And think about those men who became Jesus’ first disciples in our Gospel reading today. There was Andrew and his companion, disciples of John the Baptist. We are told that when John pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God, they immediately turned and began to follow Jesus. He needed John, his trusted guide, to point the way, to name Jesus as the one of whom he had preached, the greater one who was to come. God’s voice came to Andrew through another trusted teacher. And then Andrew, in turn, went on to tell others what he had experienced, Andrew invited his brother Simon to share what he had found. And there was Philip, who told Nathanael, confronting Nathanael’s skepticism with the invitation to “come and see.” Because of the witness of others, friends, mentors, and guides, these men claimed their calls to discipleship—and invited others.

Our Epiphany journey has taken a turn this week. Yes, Jesus is still being revealed as God’s Son. But the emphasis now is on how others are called and included—how that new thing begins to spread. Last Sunday, as we celebrated the Baptism of Our Lord, all of us renewed our own baptismal vows from that sacrament that made each one of us ministers and a part of the Body of Christ. Yesterday, Linda and I attended a “Celebration of New Ministries” at St. Mary’s in Crystal Lake. We again renewed our baptismal vows, in the midst of that church and all the other churches we represented. For we are all a part of the ministry of the Body of Christ. These events, at least in our diocese, are now celebrated as a new chapter for the whole parish, not so much as the installation of the new rector. And that is a good thing, because it makes clear that the ministry is about everyone of us—that each one is called to discipleship, to ministries in particular times and places. And each of us may hear the voice of God in a different way. It might be a voice in the night; sudden, clear, immediately life changing. For more of us, it might be that still, small voice, so still that we may not be even be sure it is speaking. For all of us, I suspect, there is the need for people to help us translate, to witness and invite, companions who can clear away the clutter and the static and fine-tune the message until it we can hear it clearly.

And it’s about more than hearing God’s voice for ourselves. We know that though God speaks, though God is the one who initiates, our world cries out for clarity. We live in a world where the word of God and visions may be rare like they were for Samuel. Or maybe not rare but just obscured by the noise of the competing messages. A world where a simple radio analogy no longer works. One where companions are needed more than ever to hold the visions up for all to see, the messages for all to hear. If people are to respond, they must hear God’s call! We are that community—that essential body of translators, of fine-tuners and static-clearers in a world where hearing and understanding is not easy.

We stand here today among other modern-day prophets and teachers, people like Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow. Like Rosa Parks, like Oscar Romero and Mother Theresa, and a host of others who have cleared away some of

the fog and chatter and focused the light of God so that we can finally see what it is that God has in mind for us and for our world. We stand among those who witness to the reality that God *speaks*. That God spoke to Samuel and *is still speaking* today! Of course, we must remember that the message we carry is not always good tidings of comfort and joy – at least, not for all who hear it. The Good News is that, of course, but the story of God’s hope for God’s creation is often a hard message, like it was for Martin Luther King and for Samuel.

It is hard to imagine what the world would be like today had Dr. King not taken the risks he did to speak truth in love--to proclaim the vision of God’s realm where all would be treated as God’s children. But this work is not done. And this is our job. It was the disciples’ job in a region under Roman occupation. It was Dr. King’s job in the struggle for civil rights. It is our job in a world that fears acts of terror, that cannot figure out how to provide basic human necessities and just treatment for all people, that cannot even manage to find ways to respect and honor those of other faiths, political views, or life perspectives. It has been the job of prophets like John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth.

Some of us may be called to be movers and shakers who make visible and lasting contributions like Simon Peter and Martin Luther King, Jr. Others of us are Eli – maybe dim of vision but with the wisdom and experience to help that Samuel in our pews hear God’s voice, maybe for the first time. We are Samuel, too, learning to listen and to speak out, even when what we are to speak is excruciatingly painful. We are John the Baptist, guiding the seekers to the Beloved One of God. We are the Andrews and the Phillips, the Jennifers and the Michaels and the Sallys, joyfully sharing our excitement and gently inviting those who may question, who may no longer trust, to “come and see” and equipping them, in turn, to invite others in a never-ending wave that ripples out to the ends of the earth, embracing and inviting – “come and hear.”

Amen.