

# Listen and Look

Sermon by the Very Rev'd Timothy Jones  
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral  
1 Samuel 3:1-20 / John 1:43-51  
January 14, 2018

A concerned husband goes to see the family  
doctor: "I think my wife is deaf," he says.

"She never hears me the first time I say  
something. I have to repeat things over and over."

"Well," the doctor replies, "we need to get an idea  
of the severity of her deafness."

And he tells him how.

The husband goes home and he does as he'd been  
instructed. He stands about 15 feet from his wife,  
who is standing in the kitchen, chopping some  
vegetables.

"Honey, what's for dinner?" he asks.

He gets no response, so he moves about five feet  
closer and asks again.

"Honey, what's for dinner?"

No reply.

He moves five feet closer, and still no reply.  
He gets fed up and moves right behind her—about  
an inch away—and asks one final time,  
"Honey, what's for dinner?"  
She replies, "For the fourth time, vegetable stew!"

Today I want to talk about the state of  
our hearing. About our willingness to listen.  
About our ability to pay attention to  
larger messages. About how we can better open  
our ears and our eyes.  
Because can't we expect God, sometimes, at  
least, to show up and guide?  
And can we learn to listen?  
And do better at watching?  
Might not God more often grace us with signs  
of his presence and moments of  
insight if we did?

That's certainly the picture we get in Scripture.  
God speaks directly, personally, specifically to  
people throughout its pages.

The word *listen* appears 332 times in the Bible,  
*more times than the word speak.*

And there is that wonderful invitation in our  
Gospel reading on the lips of Philip,  
*Come and See.*

I want to talk about listening and looking.  
We have in our times a kind of attention deficit  
disorder of the soul.

But first, we work on listening.

Because it's harder than ever.

I don't just mean the physical noise, the decibels  
of lawn mowers and leaf blowers and car engines.

As bad as that is.

Because even when we have a quiet room in  
which to sit, there is within an incessant chatter.

It's like we never stop the inner blabbing,  
always talking to ourselves.

I'm reading a book called *Declutter Your Mind*.

The authors say this:

“Your constant inner dialog distracts you from  
what is happening around you,  
right here and now.”

But, we are creatures built for listening.

As one wise observer put it,

“God gave us two ears and one mouth.”

*Two ears and one mouth!*

So we cultivate the art of listening—to others and especially to God.

And in Scripture we get a picture of God who speaks, who is not stingy with guidance, who doesn't stand back from creation like some distanced, disinterested deity.

He encourages us to listen.

Scripture reveals to us a being who will not absent himself from the creatures in whom he tenderly breathed life. God enters the world—and our lives—and willingly communicates.

“For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,” he said through the prophet. (Isaiah 62:1).

And there's the prayer of young Samuel found in our Scripture reading for today, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:7).

I have a special fondness for the story because I still remember vividly hearing a sermon about it when I was a teenager. The youth minister of my Methodist Church, the church I attended when I was a young person, preached on this passage one Sunday.

Tom Pettepiece was making a point about how God calls a person, how he called young Samuel.

And when he does call, Tom said, we need to listen, and need to respond.

You can understand why I would remember that story when you realize that I was at that very time in my life sensing a call to ordained ministry.

But to whatever kind of ministry he calls each of us, however God speaks, the story tells us that we can pray for guidance, for wisdom, and expect an answer.

That tells me that I, too, can pray a prayer  
like Samuel's and say, Speak, Lord,  
your servant is listening.

So can you.

Say it at the beginning of a day, throughout the  
day, at the end of the day.

It's interesting to me in the story form 1 Samuel  
how it begins by saying the word of the Lord was  
rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

Was it because God had grown mute?  
Or rather that no one expected to hear God speak  
so no one bothered to listen for God.  
No one expected to see God at work,  
so no one looked for God.

And the story tells us about Eli, the priest,  
Samuel's mentor,  
that his eyesight had grown dim  
so that he could not see.  
A physical condition, yes,  
but perhaps also a spiritual one?

And his sluggishness,  
his dullness and lethargy, the writer suggests,  
had to do with Eli's persistent ignoring of God  
and his ways.

Eli's sons, as they presided at temple sacrifices,  
we will soon learn,  
would take the fat of the sacrificial animals,  
even though doing so was specifically prohibited.  
Might that not help explain why visions had died  
down and the word of God  
had become a vague memory?

If we are to hear God,  
it will require of us that we live a life that assumes  
a basic posture of submission.

Our listening for God's voice grows out of a  
certain kind of life, a life of yieldedness.

I'm not talking simply about praying for guidance  
when we are anxious, in other words,

I mean so keeping such a posture of willing  
obedience that we turn from the things that God  
might nudge us to turn from.

submitting to his grand purposes.

We can also learn to pay attention, to work at it.

“Everybody else is noisier than God,” says

Eugene Peterson.

We have to *practice* concentration.

We train our eyes and ears to see and hear.

For, as Frederic Faber wrote decades ago,

“God is whispering to us well-nigh incessantly.

Whenever the sounds of the world die out in the  
soul, or sink low, then we hear these whisperings  
of God. He is always whispering to us, only we do  
not always hear, because of the noise, hurry, and  
distraction which life causes as it rushes on.”

—Frederick W. Faber

So still yourself at least sometimes so you can  
hear another, larger voice.

There may be directions and mandates God has  
for you right now, for the very decisions you face,  
for the very programs and ministries you might  
help with.

Words and guidance that we're not hearing  
because we're not listening.

So we keep our eyes open.  
We not only listen, we also look.  
This invitation of Phillip to Nathanael to  
come and see follows on John's prologue.

We heard it Christmas morning.  
"The Word was made flesh and lived among us",  
and then we watch as John the Baptist said when  
Jesus came to be baptized,  
"Behold the lamb of God!"  
But then this simple little word of John in today's  
Gospel reading, "the next day Jesus decided to go  
to Galilee."

He decided. He went. How simple.  
Jesus as fully God, then fully human.

Scholars consider this passage to be a foundation of one of the church's most central affirmations, the doctrine of the incarnation: God in the flesh, in our midst.

Jesus told Philip to follow him,  
And Philip does, and tells his friend Nathanael,  
“We have found him about whom Moses in the  
law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of  
Joseph from Nazareth.”<sup>46</sup> Nathanael said to him,  
“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”  
Philip said to him, “Come and see.”  
That invitation stands.

Come and see. Look.  
For the God we listen for, watch for,  
is no generic deity, no vague spiritual force,  
but the God revealed in a vivid way in Christ.

This is important work for our times.  
Icebergs show only a fraction of their reality on  
first glance.

There are depths and complexities underneath the  
surface you don't see right away.

It's the same with out lives.

It's the same with people.

They are complex and we might miss something  
important.

It's the same with poor people, poor nations.

We might see their need only through our  
prejudices and habitual ways of seeing.

But with a sanctified look, we see a child of God.

Or a land and a people  
where God has been at work.

So come and see.

Fix your attention on Christ.

And begin a week, this new year,  
with a prayer, the prayer that Eli, for all his  
faithlessness, has the good sense to teach.

*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*

God answered it, speaking to young Samuel.

I think God just might be willing to speak to us.

And show us anew who he is,  
and where he wants to guide us.