

Date: January 15, 2006

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 2

**SERMON: Looking and Listening for God**

Text(s): 1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:35-51

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If you were here a month ago, when the choir sang the Bach *Magnificat*, I'm sure one of the things that you appreciated about it, as I did, was Ray's introduction to it. Ray had some of the instruments of the orchestra demonstrate particular themes or rhythms for us, so that when we actually were listening to the piece (or even singing it for those of us who were in the choir), we were able to listen to that piece with different ears than we would have listened to it if Ray hadn't taught us how to listen. Knowing how to listen to a piece of music and what to listen for are important keys to gaining the greatest benefit and pleasure from the experience.

The same is true of our sense of sight. When we know how and what to look for, we see things more clearly. Many who go to the museums to look at art can look at a still life by Cezanne, for example, and see a beautiful, if somewhat strange bowl of oranges. If you're an artist, or even have simply taken an art appreciation course, where you've received some training in how to look at art, you'll see something different when you look at that same painting of a bowl of oranges. You'll see that Cezanne was exploring the problem of how to paint the edges of the various objects or pieces of fruit to separate them from their background on a two-dimensional canvas. We see what our training has prepared us to see.

The importance of training in learning to see and hear confronts us in both of our scriptures this morning. Here the subject is not musical structure or paintings of oranges. The question is how do we hear the call of God in our lives, and how do we discern the presence of God in and among and behind all the events that engage us every day? This is a question that may not be of great importance to those who do not care about God or for whom faith plays no significant part in

their lives.

For people of faith, however, the question of how we hear God's call and where we look for signs of God's activity and presence is of critical importance. If God is that which is really Real, then learning how to get in touch with that Reality may be the most important thing any of us have to do.

In our Old Testament lesson, we have the story of Samuel, the adolescent boy whom God calls to be a prophet and the spiritual leader of Israel. Before he can hear that call, Samuel has to learn how to listen for it.

The background of the passage we read this morning is that Samuel's mother Hannah and his father Elkanah had for many years been unable to have children. For a long time they had prayed ardently and vowed to dedicate their first child to God's service. Finally their prayers were answered, and Hannah gave birth to Samuel, her firstborn, and then to three more sons and two daughters. She and Elkanah made good on their vow, and when Samuel was old enough they took him to the priest of God at the shrine in Shiloh and gave the child into the care of the priest, whose name was Eli. From his childhood, Samuel was engaged in the activities in the shrine at Shiloh, assisting the priests in their work, an altar boy of sorts.

At some point, Samuel was lying in bed one evening when he heard someone calling his name. He assumed it was Eli, who was now very old, and nearly blind, so he got out of bed, went to Eli's room and said, "What do you want?" Eli, as we heard, said he had not called Samuel, and that Samuel must have been dreaming. So Samuel went back to bed, and before long, he heard his name being called again. So back to Eli he went, and again Eli denied having called him. But having been a priest for many years and trained in the art of listening for the voice of God, Eli recognized what was happening. He concluded that Samuel wasn't dreaming after all, but was hearing the voice of God. He just didn't know it was God. He wasn't schooled in the art

of listening for God. So Eli instructs him, “Go, lie down again, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” Sure enough, the call came again, and this time, Samuel knew what to do and how to respond, and discovered that his life would never be the same. That voice that came to him in the night, came with a call to service that would transform Samuel’s life and put him in the very forefront of spiritual leadership of the nation. For that to happen, however, he had to listen and respond to God’s call, and it was Eli the old priest of God who taught him how to listen, and how to respond in a way that would change his life and the life of the nation forever.

In our Gospel lesson, John emphasizes the other sense by which we discern God’s call and presence—sight. In particular, John establishes a chain of eyewitness testimony. One person sees, and then goes and invites someone else to come and see. First, John the Baptist points out Jesus to two of his own followers, and says, “Look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. . . I myself have seen and bear witness that this is the Son of God.” Then two of them begin to follow Jesus, and Jesus invites them to “come and see” for themselves, and they do. One of them, Andrew, then goes and finds his brother Simon Peter, and says, “Come and see; we have found the Messiah.” The following day, Jesus encounters Philip and invites Philip to follow him, and Philip immediately goes and finds a friend, Nathanel, and invites him to “come and see.” Nathanel comes to Jesus to see for himself, and is convinced that Jesus is the Messiah as Philip has claimed. Whether any of these people would have recognized Jesus as someone special by himself seems doubtful. All of them were invited by someone else to see for themselves. Just as Samuel needed Eli to teach him how to listen in order to hear the voice of God calling him, Peter needed Andrew and Nathanel needed Philip to help them know what to look for in order to

recognize a peasant from Galilee as God’s anointed Messiah. What we see depends on what we’re trained to look for.

One of our pastoral assistants in Paris, Dr. Keith Nickle, who was a retired professor of New Testament, gave a children’s sermon one Sunday that I’ve remembered ever since. He told of watching a shepherd girl in Spain one time, who got her flock of sheep to go where she wanted by throwing a rock out ahead of them; when the lead sheep heard or saw the rock strike the ground, it moved toward it, and the rest of the sheep followed. Keith made the point that discerning where God is present and at work in our world is like the sheep learning to hear the sound of that pebble and then moving toward it. We have to learn to distinguish that sound from other sounds; the significance of that pebble from other pebbles. We have to train our ears and eyes to listen and look for signs of God’s presence.

Discerning where God is at work in our lives and in our church or in the larger world is difficult at the best of times. The world is a very noisy place and there are hundreds of voices that call out to us. Learning to distinguish God’s voice from the other voices, to hear the sound of God’s call above and within all the other mundane tasks and conversations that fill our eyes and ears is no easy task. Our ears need to be tuned to the right frequency to hear the grace notes of God’s thematic line. Our eyes need to be trained to focus on what is real rather than on the passing parade of unreality and illusion that we see every day.

But how do we learn how to listen and what to look for? Where do we get the ear-training and the eye-training that we need? Our lessons provide us with the clues.

First of all, we can’t do it alone. Samuel had to be taught by Eli that it was God who was calling him, and how to listen and respond. Philip told Nathanel what to look for, and invited Nathanel to “come and see.” We need the witness

and mentoring of others who have learned the art of listening for God or discerning the signs of God's presence. This is why it's impossible to be a Christian all by oneself. We need community. We need the mutual encouragement, the mutual learning, the mutual mentoring that we receive from others who may be a little more accomplished than we are at looking and listening for God.

One sort of mentoring that has a long and honorable history within the Christian tradition is what is usually called "spiritual direction." It is the practice of an individual seeking guidance from another Christian whose knowledge of the ways of God are deeper than one's own. The spiritual director is someone whose insight into the ways God works within us we can trust, and they can help us grow and move forward in our own ability to look and listen. Spiritual directors can be pastors, but need not be. Spiritual directors can simply be anyone whose spiritual maturity, knowledge of God, and judgment we trust.

In one of my former parishes in New Jersey, I was going through a bad time, personally and professionally. There were two men in that parish who were antagonists, and who constantly were at work behind the scenes to control the direction of the church. I discovered that my own spiritual resources were not adequate to deal with their manipulative and underhanded tactics. I was wasting a lot of time and energy being angry, and as a result I was becoming part of the problem. So I sought out a spiritual director. I heard that in a nearby town there was an order of nuns whose vocation was to be spiritual directors for individuals. I called and asked for an appointment with someone who might be willing to take me on as a project. I was put in touch with Sister Mary Lou, and she set up an interview, the purpose of which was to mutually discern whether she was the right person to be able to give me the sort of spiritual mentoring I needed. As it happened, she was,

and for two years, I went to see Sister Mary Lou once a month for about an hour-and-a-half each time. This was not therapy or counseling; she didn't try to analyse me or get me to psychoanalyse myself. Nor did she coach me on how to counter the tactics of these two men. Rather she would listen to me as I shared the things I was struggling with, and then she would ask me questions like, "When this man does the sort of thing you've just told me about, how are you praying about that? Where do you think the real spiritual issue may be for you?" or "When you pray for God's guidance about how to deal with this man, are you letting God see how angry you really are?" Then at the end of each session, she'd suggest some ways I might pray about the issues I was dealing with or something I might read that would give me some insight along the lines of our discussion. My work with Sister Mary Lou didn't change the situation; those two men were just as big a challenge as ever. It did change me, however, and those two years of spiritual direction were a vital time of spiritual growth and maturity for me. They may very well have saved my ministry.

Such mentoring or spiritual direction can also happen in small groups as well as one-on-one. That's why it's important that we provide opportunities for prayer groups or support groups, so that we can mentor one another and learn from one another.

But if community, and the mutual mentoring and direction that comes to us from others is one essential, another is the discipline of personal prayer and reflection. Musicians have their weekly lesson with the teacher, but then follow it up with long hours of solitary practice. The artist may put in her time in the drawing studio under the eye of the teacher, but she will also spend long hours on her own sketching and experimenting with colors and pigments, learning what works and what doesn't, developing her own style.

Our ability to hear God's voice and

discern where God is present and active in the world around us is directly proportional to the time we give to practicing the spiritual disciplines. The cultivation of inner quiet in a noisy world, the ability to frame the questions that confront us in spiritual terms— not as Americans or Republicans or Democrats— but *as Christians*, to act thoughtfully and faithfully rather than simply react to events impulsively, the ability to develop genuine compassion in our relationships are all the fruits of practice. Musicians become proficient by practicing; painters become proficient by painting; Christians become proficient by praying and thinking and acting *as Christians*.

There is one more ingredient in the mix, and it's the end toward which our looking and listening for God is directed. Hearing the voice of God, recognizing where God is at work is not simply for our own enrichment; it is not a way for us to find personal inner peace while the rest of the world goes to hell around us. God's call to us is always for the sake of others, for the world. God called Samuel to become God's spokesman to the nation. Jesus called his disciples to proclaim and live a new social reality— the Kingdom of God. Hearing God's call, seeing the signs of God's presence always has a missional purpose. God's kingdom of justice and love cannot be reduced to a private spiritual experience; it is a reality to be proclaimed and lived out publicly in the world.

Certainly Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we commemorate tomorrow, understood this. He was one who learned, often reluctantly and painfully, how to look and listen for God. He understood clearly that once heard, that call would take him to places he probably would rather not have gone or to confrontations he'd rather have avoided. And yet, where would our country be today if he hadn't responded to that call to follow Christ, even when it was with fear and trembling?

We are to bear witness to what we have

seen and heard, so that others will be able to see and hear as well. In a world where the sounds of human violence and the sight of human poverty and degradation are so prevalent, the only way the world will have hope is if there are some who through community and prayer have learned how to hear amidst the discord and dissonance of the human condition, the background theme of grace and can say to those around, "Listen, do you hear what I hear?" or "We have found the one who can save us. Come and see."