

## Sermon for January 17, 2021—“Listen”

Second Sunday after Epiphany, Year B—Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-20; John 1:35-51

A young man concludes that he’s called to religious life. Accordingly, he joins an order with a strict vow of silence. There was one exception. Every ten years, the monks are allowed to speak two words, but only to the abbot. Ten years pass.

He enters the abbot’s room and speaks his two words: “Bed hard.” Ten more years pass. He again enters the abbot’s room and says, “Food bad.” Still another ten years pass and his two words to the abbot are: “I quit.” The abbot replies, “I’m not surprised. You’ve been here thirty years, and all you’ve done is complain.”

There are many “call stories” throughout scripture. You know, stories about people that God calls for doing or saying certain things that God needs done or said. People like Noah and Abraham. Moses and Elijah. Isaiah and Jeremiah. Samuel—as we heard in our first reading. The disciples—as we heard in our gospel reading and—of course—Paul. These stories are—by-and-large—fairly well known.

Most of us are familiar with the term “fishers of men…” and the hymn “Here I Am, Lord.” But I also know that many have difficulty with the notion of “being called.” Heaven knows—I did! There are lots of misconceptions and I’ve heard most—if not all—of them.

The three main ones are:

1. That only certain people like pastors, missionaries, priests, nuns, etc.—ordained people—have a specific calling from God; that there’s special training involved—like going to seminary to learn Greek/Hebrew—and that if that happens their lives will change dramatically and that they’ll have to give up too much in the process.
2. That when God calls, they’ll know and recognize it, because it’ll be a powerfully emotional and deeply moving experience. In the minds of many, if there’s no burning bush or voice from heaven, it’s not a real call from God.
3. That God couldn’t possibly be calling them because either
  - a. they believe that there’s something about themselves that’s lacking, meaning that they lack the character/skills that **they** believe God requires  
or
  - b. they believe they’re too old.

We’ve talked about some of these before. So, it shouldn’t surprise anyone that I believe these are all—to one degree or another—untrue. I’ve never quite understood why do so many people, many of them good Christians, believe that being called God can’t or won’t happen to them!

Do they think that God doesn’t do that anymore? Are they uninformed about how God calls people? Might it be because they refuse to believe it and have simply stopped listening? If that’s so, why? What is it that they fear? Is it a question of discomfort? Is it a question of inconvenience? Is it that they believe they’ll fail? Or that their family and friends won’t understand? Probably all of the above or some combination.

And you know what? I kind of get that. We've lived our lives and we've more-or-less reached a point, where we think we have things figured out. We're more-or-less content with life and are satisfied with where things are—or so we've told ourselves, however precarious things may actually be or how deluded we've become. Like the old saying: The devil you know is better than the devil you don't know.

I mean—we've got a pretty good idea of who God is, how God works and what God wants from us—right? Show up at church on Sunday. Put something in the plate. Maybe be part of a bible study—so long as it makes us feel better about ourselves, reinforcing what we already know and doesn't make us think too much or challenge us in any way. And maybe—if we're feeling up to it—we volunteer for something, as long as it doesn't require going to too many meetings.

Prayer? Fine, but keep it brief—God's a busy man! What? You want me to do it? Sorry—I couldn't possibly. I wouldn't know what to say. I'd be too embarrassed. Hey—we're just ordinary people, living ordinary lives. We like it that way and we prefer that it stay that way.

Which is kind of odd when you think about it, because nowadays, most people **dislike** being considered ordinary. We want to be the first—or the best. We like to feel special—unique. And we don't want to do or say anything that might diminish ourselves in any way in the eyes of those around us or to tear away at the façade we've built and reveal our true selves, which deep down we believe is truly ordinary and non-descript.

But you see, to God—we **are** unique. We **are** special. And there's nothing we or anyone else can say or do to change that!

As our first reading opens, there doesn't seem to be anything special about Samuel. In our gospel reading, Jesus' appearance was so **unremarkable** that John the Baptist had to point him out. In both cases—the extraordinary wasn't **apparent**.

At first—both Samuel and Eli misunderstood the voice they'd heard. At first—the disciples of John, saw nothing unremarkable about Jesus. Especially Nathaniel, who thought that nothing **good**—let alone extraordinary—could come from Nazareth.

Scripture is chock full of people who'd lost their ability to perceive the extraordinary and who're only aware of the obvious—especially in themselves. We're not **unlike** these biblical people. We don't always look beneath the surface, so we often miss the extraordinary in what is ordinary.

We don't hear the voice of God in the voices of others, calling us to great things; to sacrifice ourselves for others, or give of ourselves to those around us. We don't recognize Christ in the faces of the honest, thoughtful people that we encounter every day in ordinary situations, circumstances and places—the understanding people who help us in simple ways.

All of which means, to one degree or another, that we've stopped looking; that we've stopped listening; that we've stopped engaging. But it takes only a little effort to attune our ears to hear the voice of God; to adjust our sight to recognize Christ in our midst. We refuse to do so at our peril. What I mean by that isn't necessarily that God will be **unhappy** with us—though that is certainly a distinct possibility. What I mean is that you'll potentially joy-filled, meaningful, life-enriching and life-fulfilling experience.

As hard as this might be to believe, we have the same access to God, to the Holy Spirit, that those we read about in the Bible do. God personally went to great lengths to make that possible. Now is what we may accomplish be as impressive as what Samuel, the disciples, or even what Paul accomplished? Probably not—but guess what? The results aren't up to us—they're up to God!

You see, only God can change the human heart. Our only concern is accepting the call as it comes to us in the ordinary events of life; remembering that God doesn't call the equipped, he equips the called.

“Here I am, Lord—speak for your servant is listening.”

God has a plan for each of us. God seeks to guide each of us. And that call is personal. God calls us by name as he called Samuel. God seeks us out as Jesus sought out Philip. God calls us for a **purpose**. A **good** purpose. **His** purpose. God calls fishermen. Teachers. Fireman. Accountants. Cashiers. Auto mechanics. Lawyers. Doctors. Laborers. Farmers. Writers. Butchers. Bakers. Candle stick makers. And yes—even car salesmen. God calls young. Old. Rich. Poor. Black. White. Red. Yellow. Brown. God calls men. Women. And everything in between. You see where I'm going with this?

And that—brothers and sisters—is the thing. God calls everyone!!! At different times and in different places and in different ways, but make no mistake, God calls everyone. I wish I could tell you how and where and when, but I can't.

Will it change us? Yes—but Christ himself said that, “**Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me;**” that “**those who find their life will lose it,** and that “**...those who lose their life for my sake will find it.**” (Matthew 10:38-39)

From my own experience, I believe that is true. But even if I could explain it, everyone's experience is different. All I can really say is to trust God. But trust **yourself** as well. Be patient. Remain open to God. Pay attention. Listen.

Corrie Ten Boom, author and Holocaust survivor, was once asked, “How do you know God's voice when you hear it?” She replied with a question of her own. “How do you know the voices of your loved ones? You know them because you listen to them often. Listen often in obedience to the still, small voice of God.” She then quoted the prophet Isaiah and I close here:

**“And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way—walk in it.’”** (Isaiah 30:21)

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.