

## **"Speak, Lord, For Your Servant Is Listening!"**

(I Samuel 3:3-20)

Even though our Christmas decorations have been taken down and packed away, like our Protestant and Catholic brothers and sisters, we're still in the Season called Epiphany. Epiphany, which means "manifestation" or "showing." The season began with the arrival of the wise men, who saw a star in the sky and followed it to where the Son of God was revealed to them. Our scripture lessons throughout Epiphany, until Lent, have to do with some of the other many ways in which God has revealed himself in the past.

But, you know, during this Season of Epiphany (and every season), there's a danger that we moderns will think that God's revealing of himself is limited to the past. Maybe it's always been a tendency of us humans to think that God doesn't reveal himself in the present as he did in the past. For way back in the days of Samuel, in our Older Testament lesson for today, the people didn't expect God to reveal himself to them.

The boy Samuel, who had been apprenticed to the priest Eli, was sleeping in the temple one night, when he heard a voice calling his name. Assuming that the priest Eli needed him, Samuel got up and went to Eli. Eli, though, hadn't called the boy and thus told Samuel to go back to sleep. It never dawned on either the boy or even the priest that God could be talking to the boy, revealing himself and his wishes to the boy. And since even Samuel and Eli, those who served in the temple, weren't looking for manifestations of God, no wonder, as the text expresses it, "the word of the Lord was rare in those days: visions were not widespread" (I Samuel 3:1).

You know, even though we humans are fickle, God is not. He doesn't change. The Older and Newer Testaments manifest a God who likes to interact with his people, talking to them, revealing himself and his wishes. God called Abraham to leave Ur. He spoke to Moses in the form of a burning bush. He spoke to and through the prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus. He spoke to Saul on the road to Damascus.

Similarly God still wants to speak to and interact with us today. I have no doubt that God continues to constantly reveal himself. We all know the old saying about the tree. Does a falling tree make noise even if no one is there

to hear it? Of course. Similarly, God reveals himself, manifests himself, speaks, every day, even if no one notices.

And so this morning, let's think for a moment about what it is that keeps us from hearing God speak to us. I would suggest that the first hindrance from hearing God speak to us is our expectations. In other words, we must ask ourselves if we expect God to speak to us.

For example, what were your expectations when you came to worship today? Did you expect a one-way worship service—that you would come and praise God, all within a one-hour time frame, and then leave? Or, did you expect to praise God, to speak to God, and also to hear him speak to you? When you were driving to church this morning, did you think to yourself, "I wonder what God will tell me today?"

When you open your Bible, what are your expectations? Do you expect to just read some words God spoke in the past? Or, do you expect to have God speak to you in the here and now?

And what about when you pray? What are your expectations there? Do you expect a one-way conversation--with just you talking? I remember when Paul first spent some time with my mother and her side of the family in southern Illinois. After the meeting, my mother commented to me that Paul seemed very nice--but he really hadn't said anything. When I shared this with Paul, his comment was that he hadn't been able to ever get a word in, cause my mother and my two aunts talked constantly. Do we do the same in prayer? Do we monopolize the time? Or, do we allow time for silence, in which God can get a word in edgewise to us? Most of us in prayer are quick to tell God what he should do for us, but we don't allow him the space to reveal himself and his wishes for us.

And what about when you meet a stranger? What are your expectations there? Do you expect to find God in that stranger, challenging you, hoping that you will be hospitable to him?

Yes, if we want God to manifest himself to us, then we must begin by expecting him to do so.

Secondly, if we want to hear God speak to us, then we have to offer God time and space in which to speak to us. Remember, God's way is not to intrude. Rather, he stands at the door of our hearts and knocks. If we spend time in silence in worship, in prayer, reading the Bible, being with the stranger, we're offering God the time and space to enter into our lives, to reveal himself, and to speak to us.

Thirdly, we need to be open to and accepting of God's revelation. There's a constant danger that we'll be too full of what we believe or what we want to believe to be open to God himself. This was certainly the case with Saul. He was considered a very religious man. He was a Pharisee, no less! But it took a blinding light to make him step outside what he wanted to believe and be open to the fact that God might have something to teach him.

When I was in seminary, I read a book entitled The Last Temptation of Christ. So when the book was made into a movie, I wanted to see it. Now, since the fourth century, the official stance of the church has been that Jesus was completely human, yet also completely divine. It's in all of those creeds some of us memorized as children. Nonetheless, the idea that Jesus might have been so human that he actually experienced temptations--that the sacrifice he made for us was not only his body but also his desire to have a normal human family life--caused an outbreak of protest. I remember that Paul and I had to walk through a line of protesters in St. Louis to see the movie. Protests were held all over the country, but one image in particular bears remembering.

There was a rough cross on the pavement with an actor portraying Jesus on the cross, writhing in pain. A well-dressed movie executive was bending over Jesus, swinging the hammer. With each mock blow, the actor-Jesus screamed in agony. The message of these protesters was that Hollywood had crucified Jesus with the movie. Then suddenly, another figure, a preacher, came forward. He reached into his pocket and pulled out carefully prepared words to read, but every time he tried to speak, his message was drowned out by the screams of the figure on the cross. Finally this preacher walked over to the Christ and whispered to him, "be quiet now...I have something I want to say."

And so, you see, it's not enough that we expect God's revelation, or even that we invite him into our lives. We must also be open to what he has to say, even if it's contrary to what we believe or want to believe.

God calls each one of us. He speaks our names. Yours and mine. In the middle of the night, in the busyness of the day, when we're alone and hurting, when we're in the midst of our own personal agendas, when we meet a stranger, when we hear of or see a wrong that needs to be righted. During this Season of Epiphany, therefore, let us expect God to speak to us. Let us give him the time and space to do so. And numerous times throughout each and every day, let us say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; January 18, 2009