

TINGLING EARS

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

1 Samuel 3:1-11

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We are told that "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." (1 Sam. 3:1) The time was about three thousand years ago, and yet the time described could so easily be now. Perhaps it's not so much that the word of the Lord is rare and visions limited, but that like those Old Testament folks, we either fail to hear or we simply ignore God's Word: we either don't see God's visions or we fail to understand them when they occur. Going about our day-to-day business, caught in the grip of the ordinary, the expected, the routine, could it be that we stop expecting and looking for something new; we stop expecting and listening for God's voice? Not only do we not expect God to speak directly to us, we do not expect God to tell us something different than what we already know and are used to doing.

Our story opens, and we are immediately introduced to two characters. There is old Eli – he is a priest, the head priest in fact. And then there is a boy named Samuel. The setting for the story is the temple – the central place for worship, learning and the practicing of faith for the Israelites. This Temple is not the grand and glorious one that Solomon would later build in Jerusalem; it is more accurately known as the tabernacle. This tabernacle was much smaller and simpler and was even portable during their wilderness-wandering days. But at this time it was more permanently located in a place called Shiloh. However, the truly important thing is that this tabernacle temple was the place where the Arc of the Covenant was kept – where the tablets of the Ten Commandments were stored.

In our story, Eli represents an older generation. He has spent his life focused on the word of the Lord. His entire life has been devoted to priestly duties - the handling of holy things, the studying of Scripture, and also praying to and listening for God. As a priest, it was also his job to help the people learn about and listen for God.

Then there is Samuel, the boy who is meant to represent a new generation. There is a story behind Samuel's presence at the temple in Shiloh. Samuel had come there at the age of two. His mother, Hannah, and his father, Elkanah, were people of great faith. For years they had been unable to have a child. When Hannah finally conceived, they decided it was only right that their child be dedicated to the service of God. So when Hannah was finished weaning Samuel, she took him to Eli, the head priest at the temple in Shiloh. From that point on, the temple became his home. Samuel would have received a yearly visit or two from his parents, but he was basically raised by Eli.

In our story, the Lord unexpectedly calls out in the stillness of the night when everyone is sleeping. God calls out Samuel's name, so it is clear that he has come not to old Eli but to young Samuel. In fact, the Lord's voice does not even stir the old man who has been pouring over the Scriptures, praying and listening, worshiping and sacrificing year after year. The Lord's voice comes to a boy who was not yet listening, and who still had a lot to learn about God. The thing is, Eli had prepared all his life for just such an experience, and he likely would have known right away who was calling him, but instead, God chose a young, inexperienced boy. What's up with that?

A little more information might be helpful as we reflect on God's choice. We know that Eli was up in years, and his eyesight was poor. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, we are told that he is overweight. Over the years, Eli had become

complacent and content. His sons had grown up and had also become priests like their dad, but their behavior as priests was terrible, sinful in fact. And yet Eli had chosen to turn a blind eye towards them. He refused to discipline them. Eli was not a bad man but he had fallen into the pattern of doing the same thing – keeping things the way they had always been. He settled and had chosen not to “rock the boat.” Eli had become established, complacent and even stagnant, and God was not pleased. God couldn’t work with such an attitude because God’s desire was for something more, something different. God’s vision was for something new and so his call goes out to the one who was not set in his ways, God calls out to young Samuel, who even though he was inexperienced in so many ways was one who was open to a new word and to new possibilities. In this story we are meant to see that change is coming and the torch of God’s Word is being passed to another.

Every year at our East Ohio Annual Conference, we acknowledge a similar shift as we recognize those who are retiring on Monday evening and then welcome those being ordained as elders on Wednesday evening. In fact, for a number of years it was the practice towards the end of the retirement service that one of the retiring clergy members would symbolically place his/her stole unto the shoulders of one preparing to be ordained later in the week. Those who at one time were right in the thick of ministry symbolically step aside to make room for younger leaders. Of course, such a shift naturally brings change – new ideas, new ways of doing things.

In my 33 years of being a minister, I have seen lots of changes. I’ve seen the development of new ministries and styles of worship. I’ve seen how technology has brought huge changes in the way many churches communicate, worship and do ministry. The ministry of Jesus Christ continues, but it does not look the same as it used to. Many of you know exactly what I mean. In our Old Testament story, it is Samuel who will go on to accomplish God’s work, because it is Samuel who is able to hear God’s words for a new and hope filled future; it is Samuel who is able to envision a future that is different than the past.

Here at the beginning of 2019, this church is in a weakened condition compared to 30-40-50 years ago. Yes, we have been faithful and devoted in many ways, but have we also become complacent and content, no longer able to hear new words and see new visions? This church has a long and rich history in Chagrin Falls, and our sanctuary is beautiful with many traditional symbols of faith. And yet, the pews are not even half filled. But somewhere, not far away, is a concrete block, steel fabricated building, not nearly as attractive as ours, but there in that place more people including many young people, gather to worship in one service than we have here in a month.

Is the word of the Lord going elsewhere because we are not able to envision things any differently than the way they have been for years? It’s a tough question to ponder as we look to the future, and as we consider what it means to be a healthy church, and how we can do a much better job of making and maturing disciples of Jesus Christ. While considering the tough question of what faithful ministry looks like, I think it’s important to remember the interaction between old Eli and young Samuel. Clearly, it is through the collaborating efforts of an older man and a boy that God’s new vision is revealed. It is old Eli who guides Samuel to the point of being able to listen and respond to God. Without Eli’s suggestions and guidance, Samuel may have continued in his confusion. Those who have had past experiences with God can often be very helpful to those who have not had such experiences.

After all, older Christians have weathered storms; they have acquired wisdom through their life experiences. To disregard such experiences and the lessons learned and the truths discovered as a result would be foolish. It is always a mistake to

disregard all tradition as being irrelevant. Knowing where we have been provides a foundation, and gives us knowledge and confidence to venture into an unfamiliar and always changing future. However, relying too much on tradition can also prevent us from experiencing God's exciting and hope-filled future.

So, how is it that you experience this story of God's call to young Samuel? Does it inspire you or does it cause you to worry, perhaps even despair? How you experience this story may well depend on whether you identify more closely with Eli or Samuel. Consider for a moment with whom of these two you most clearly identify. I fully admit that I am more closely attuned to Eli, and likely a majority of you here today are as well. However, I can also say that I am determined that such a reality will not stop me from listening for God's call to the Samuel's of today and encouraging their faithful response. I hope you have a similar determination. But if you happen to be feeling more despair than excitement today, I want you to thoughtfully and prayerfully consider verse 11 in our 1 Samuel passage.

Verse 11 tells us that the news God has for Samuel is "ear-tingling" news. "I am about to do something," says the Lord, "that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle." Isn't that a great verse; I love that verse! When was the last time you felt a "tingle" about the Word of God? When was the last time you experienced hope kicking into such high gear that it's like pins and needles all over your body because you were so excited? This "tingling ears" experience is how it feels when God's thrilling news brings us to times of renewal. Are you feeling it? What might it take for you to feel it?

So, what do you think about all of this? Can young and old, mature and immature, experienced and inexperienced, wise and confused, subdued and passionate work together to understand and accomplish God's "ear tingling" word? If you can imagine it and be a part of it, then I fully believe the will of God will continue to be accomplished in and through this church for many generations to come.

Together, as the multi-generational church of Jesus Christ, let us be thankful for the past while at the same time listening for God's word for today's generation – a word that will certainly compel us to do things differently. Together, we can begin to make decisions based on the tingle of hope for the future instead of the backward pull of fear and desperation. Together, we can encourage one another as we serve and glorify God in new and exciting and faithful ways.

After all, God is not and never will be limited by our limited knowledge and wisdom and ability to understand. So, whether you are young or old or somewhere in between, God's word comes to us today and challenges us to embrace with openness and to respond with faith to God's vision for the future. May we hear God's life-generating Word and experience a tingling sense of excitement for what God is calling us to in our generation! And may Christ be honored and God glorified through our response! Amen.