

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The People of God: Listening”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
January 14, 2018

1 Samuel 3:1-18; Mark 1:4-11

It was one of those mornings. Our daughter Katie was a sophomore in high school and I was her transportation to high school. We lived a little too far for her to walk and a little too close to get bus service. So, every morning I would drag her out of bed (she is not a morning person) and watch as she moved at snail speed getting ready to leave. We finally made it into the car and off we went. She was almost dozing in her seat. I was thinking about my sermon. We turned right, then left, then another right. I pulled into the parking lot and said, “Katie, we’re here. You need to get going. She fully opened her eyes and as only a teenage daughter can say it, “Dad, this is the church, not my school.” And she was absolutely right. My inner driving instinct had taken us not to her school but to my work. It was one of those powerful reminders to me that we human beings are as much creatures of habit as much we are thinking people.

I realize that what we want to believe about ourselves is that we have free choice. That we are thinking creatures who always make the best, and most rational decisions. That we are fully capable of choosing the good, the thing that God would have us do, every time. Unfortunately, studies have shown that we seldom do just that. We don’t because we are programmed. We are programmed by our cultures; by our families of origin; by our genetic makeup. Scripture understands this, when Ezekiel says, “Like mother, like daughter.”¹ And “The sins of the fathers will be handed down to the third and fourth generation.”² This programming comes with both positive and negative aspects. The positive is that much of this programming can align us with Jesus’ alternative kingdom of love, compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation. The negative aspect of this programming is that it passes on prejudices, fears, actions and beliefs that deter our living fully into our role as citizens of Christ’s kingdom. The question then becomes, how do we change our programming? How do we become those people God designed us to be? There are many ways we could look at this question, but the first is listening to and for God.

First, we are to listen to and for God, openly. This is Eli’s story. My guess is that few of us really know much about Eli. He is one of those minor Biblical characters who we normally move right on by because we are more focused on Samuel, first as a boy then as a man. But this morning, Eli, who was the great high priest of God in Shiloh, decides that he will be completely open to whatever Samuel has to tell him. The setting for the story is that Samuel’s mother, Hanna, could not conceive. She prays to God and tells God that if she does conceive, she will dedicate her child to God. Hanna gets pregnant, and Samuel is born. When he is weaned, she takes him to Eli, to serve in the Temple of God. Eli loves and trains Samuel. But one night God comes to Samuel and not to Eli with a message. Eli knows that this is not good news for him and his family. Yet in the morning, he tells Samuel to speak exactly what he has heard from God. To hold nothing back. As Samuel spells out what will happen, Eli does not claim that it is fake news, but says, “It is the Lord. Let him do what seems good to him.” Even in the face of bad news, Eli is open to hear what God is saying.

¹ Ezekiel 16:44

² Exodus 20:5

You and I are to listen openly. What does this look like? It looks very much like Samuel and Eli. It looks like us being willing to listen for God telling us things that we do not want to hear; things that challenge our programmed prejudices and notions of how the world is going to be. Things that challenge the cultural feedback loops through which we operate. Things that cause us to say, maybe I have been wrong all along. Things that are new and thought provoking. Things that maybe only God would say to us, because we might not have a Samuel around to be the bearer of bad news. To be clear, God often speaks to us far more like God did to Eli, through others, than God speaks to us directly as God did with Samuel. I don't want to pretend that listening openly is an easy thing to do, because it is not. It is in fact a very difficult thing to do. Yet it is critical if we are serious about being citizens of Christ's alternative kingdom.

Second, we are to listen to and for God, discerningly. This is the Jesus' story. The Gospel of Mark does not give us any birth or childhood narratives of Jesus' early life. Even so, what I think we can discern from the other Gospels is that Jesus is about 30 years old or so when he arrives at the Jordan, where John is baptizing. What this means is that for the first thirty years of his life he lived a rather conventional Jewish life. He was the good son. He was the good eldest brother. He was the good Jew, attending synagogue on a regular basis as he learned the Word of God. In addition, what we learn is that he was constantly listening for God's direction for his life. He spent time in prayer and discernment. I would argue, that it was this listening to and for God through discernment that caused him to leave his normal Jewish life and not only be baptized by John, but upon hearing God's voice, set out on his mission as an apocalyptic preacher intent on establishing God's alternative kingdom.

You and I are to listen with discernment. What this means is that we are to hold up everything we hear and ask questions such as: Is this true? Is this in alignment with what Jesus taught? Is this in alignment with how Jesus lived? Is this how a citizen of Jesus' alternative kingdom would think and act? Or, is what I am hearing simply a reflection of my programming? Is what I am hearing appealing because it appeals to my programming, my prejudices and my particular upbringing? Listening with discernment, is more difficult, than listening openly. It is more difficult because it forces us to look deep inside ourselves. It forces us to challenge the programming that we have internalized over the years; programming that might be liberal or conservative or libertarian or I-don't-really-care-atarian.

Listening openly and discerningly is what led Abraham and Sarah to leave their families and journey for God. It is what led Moses to give up the comfortable life of a shepherd and set God's people free. It is what led the Apostle Paul to cease jailing Christians and become the church's leading evangelist. It is what caused Martin Luther King to set aside the comfortable life of a pastor and speak out not only for the rights of people of color, but for the rights of the poor and oppressed. It is what caused him to challenge the programming of people both north and south. It is what caused him to give his life for the cause of Jesus' alternative kingdom.

You and I are called to do the same. We are called to listen openly and discerningly such that we can hear more and more clearly what God is telling us to do and to be. My challenge to you then on this Sunday before MLK Day, is to ask yourselves this question. How am I listening both openly and discerningly for God's word to me, such that my life might more and more reflect my place as one of God's people; as a citizen in Christ's alternative kingdom?