

Faith Mennonite Church  
January 18, 2009

**The Word of the Lord: Making House Calls**  
*1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20*

It was a dismal time. Eli, the priest was getting old. The custom would have been for his sons to succeed him, but they weren't fit in any way. They were corrupt scoundrels. Rather than learning the priestly ways, they stole meat from the priests who were preparing the prescribed sacrifices. Rather than calling people to honor God they were sleeping with the women who served in the tent of meeting, I suppose the equivalent to our Sunday morning greeters.

And so it is said of that time that the "Word of the Lord was rare." It was rare because few people were listening. As if to emphasize this state of spiritual darkness, the writer of 1 Samuel sets this young boy Samuel's encounter with God in the evening as it was getting dark, just as the last lamp was about to burn out. And the darkness is accentuated by the fact that old Eli can't see very well, his aging eyes probably clouded by cataracts. The Word of the Lord was rare. But it wasn't extinct.

There has never been a time when the Word has been completely forgotten or lost. In the chapter that precedes today's story we learn of Hannah, a woman who desperately wanted a child but had had trouble conceiving. She used this deep longing in her life to draw closer to God, to ask for God to bless her with a child, and then in gratitude she gave her beloved child, Samuel, back to God. While he was still very young she offered him as a servant to priest Eli in the temple.

It's hard to believe that Hannah hadn't heard the gossip about Eli's sons and we might wonder at her judgment in sending her young boy to a place where all was not well. But Hannah trusted in the Word of God. For her, her son Samuel was evidence of the truth and power of that Word. She would trust her child to that Word, to God, and she no doubt prayed for him daily, prayed that he too would grow to know and experience a living encounter with the Living Word.

How many Hannahs have there been in history, faithful women and men who continued to believe and follow the Word of the Lord, to follow God's way, even when the Word was rare. I think of the monasteries in the early middle ages that kept the written Word of the Bible from being burned by plundering armies when tribal and regional warlords provided the only political structures in Europe. I think of Christians in small house churches in China who maintained a vibrant faith even when their gatherings were illegal. I think of the leaders of the black churches in the United States that sang and prayed through Jim Crow segregation, lynchings and church burnings in this country. I think of the Mennonite Church in Colombia that has continued to follow Jesus and assist displaced families even when their members have received death threats. And I think of families with young children in this congregation who turn off (or never turn on) the television and teach words of peace and actions of love, forgiveness, healing, and hope. And like Eli, those parents encourage their children, like young Samuel, to develop listening skills and an attentiveness to God's voice. The Word of the Lord may be rare but it is never extinct.

The Apostle Paul's words to the church at Corinth are also about hearing and obeying but in a different setting. Instead of ancient Israel that hadn't yet known the time of kings, Paul was writing to new Christians in a first century Mediterranean city, influenced by Greek culture. The Greeks viewed the body and soul as a dichotomy – the soul was important, for some the body was peripheral. Now we know of the Greek tradition of athletic excellence and exercise. But there was also a notion, evidenced in the church in Corinth that what one did with the body, eating, drinking, sexual relations, didn't really matter or influence the soul. The body would pass away.

Paul enters with a different point of view and he presents a Christian anthropology based in the Jewish notion of the body and a Christian understanding of resurrection. What Jewish Christians like

Paul carried from Judaism into their new religious experience with regard to the body was the Jewish understanding that “humans do not *have* bodies; they *are* bodies. *Soma*, the Greek word that Paul uses in his letter, means body in the sense of one’s self—that is, who you are” (Sampey). Paul countered the Gnostic view that regarded human beings as composed of body and some more valuable inner spark that might be termed soul or spirit.

Paul’s understanding of resurrection with regard to the body was that just as Christ was raised in bodily form, Christians too would one day be united with God in bodily form. Not necessarily *this* body, but some body. And here we could add one more meaning to the dimensions of communion that we discussed last Sunday: our baptism into Christ and our participation in the body of Christ through the Lord’s supper, bring our very bodies into communion with God. Our bodies belong to God; Christ’s spirit dwells in our bodies. How we care for our bodies, how we live in our bodies, what we do with our bodies influences our ability to hear and be shaped by the Word of God.

So I invite us to think about several things this morning, as a way of taking stock, at the beginning of a new year, of how present or how rare the Word of God is in our lives:

- a) If God comes calling in your house (your physical home or apartment) as God came to Samuel in the temple, is it a place where the Word of the Lord is rare or ever present? Is your home a place that is open to God’s Word, has places that are conducive to prayer, study, reflection, and listening, and allows light to enter? Are the computer, television, ipod, or radio always on or do you turn them off and take time to read, including spiritual reading, and to let your mind roam in silence, listening for the inner Word?
- b) Do you have a Hannah or an Eli in your life? A spiritual elder or companion who prays for you and with you. Someone with whom you can share your questions, and also your experiences of the divine and your encounter with Jesus?
- c) Are you honoring God with your body? Are you caring for it as the home of God’s Spirit? Do you feed it nutritious food in moderate amounts? Do you keep it healthy through exercise? Are you careful that use of alcohol or other substances are not filling a longing that God wishes to fill? And as you make decisions about sexuality, are you following media cues that portray sex simply as physical gratification and pleasure—an irresistible attraction—or are you remembering that sexual intimacy involves God who resides within us and it is intended for our spiritual union with the person we join our life with?

Tomorrow we commemorate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We remember Dr. King as one who spoke the Word of the Lord and reminded Christians—and the whole nation—that this Word is not just about personal morality but also about social justice. Like the Apostle Paul and our Jewish forebears who held body and soul in unity, we walk in the footsteps of Dr. King and our King Jesus when we embody and speak the Word of the Lord that binds us both to Christ and to our neighbors. As Dr. King called for freedom to ring, I pray that the Word made flesh, who lived among us, will by God’s spirit, “dwell in us richly,” that we will model Christ in our homes, in our workplaces, in our friendships, in our whole lives. I pray that the Word of God will not be rare, but in our hearts, our minds, guiding every action.

Joetta Schlabach