

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who is calling your name, Jesus Christ our Savior and our Lord, amen.

Toward the beginning of today's scripture text, we find these very interesting and curious words, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." From my observations of our culture and society, you could say the same thing about today. I saw a saying on a Church sign a long time ago that read something like, "If the distance between you and God has grown, who do you think moved?" If the word of the Lord is rare these days do you think it's because God has suddenly stopped caring? Has God stopped loving us and His whole creation? Where is the Word of God today?

I have a theory about this. First of all, I would change that Church sign message to read, "If the Word of God is rare these days, have we stopped listening?" My theory is God has not stopped loving, forgiving, and being merciful. God has not stopped calling people into service, whether it be ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament or Commissioned into the ministry of Word and Service. In fact, God is speaking to more and more people today than ever before, but most people miss the call. There are many reasons people can't or won't hear or respond to God's call today. Maybe we're too busy, being distracted by many things. Remember the story of the dinner party at Mary and Martha's house. Martha was so busy cooking and cleaning up she got frustrated with her sister, who

sat at Jesus's feet and listened to his teaching ministry. Mary heard God's voice while her sister Martha was too busy.

I've spent many weary nights pondering why God's Word seems to be falling on deaf ears. Yes people are busy. We have lots of things that distract us, but so did my parents and people just 20 or 30 years ago. In that same time Church attendance has dropped in every mainline denomination across the board. I realize God speaks in places other than the Church, but if one is seeking the presence of God, I would certainly think the Church might be a good place to start the search... Maybe there's something more than just being too busy at the root of our decline. Some people undoubtedly have been hurt by things that have happened within the Church and left because of their hurt feelings. Others have traded in their trust in God for a reliance on science. I think this is exacerbated by the "Evangelical" Christian right's insistence on turning the Bible into a science book. They say you can't be a Christian if you don't believe every word of the Bible literally. Most Lutherans and Christians of most other mainline denominations don't believe that, by the way... Unfortunately, enough of the American Evangelical churches do, and their brand of religion is so popular in the media that unchurched people think we're all Biblical literalists. I believe that scares away a lot of people from hearing God's Word today.

There's another problem we have with hearing God's Word today. In our text, Samuel heard God calling him, but didn't know it was God. I've been affected by this issue many times in my life. I think I hear God calling me in a certain direction, but how can I be sure... If I follow what I perceive to be God's call and it's just another voice or even worse, my own inner demon, then I'll look like an idiot and most likely fail spectacularly. I don't want that, so I resist, and I investigate and I procrastinate... Sometimes, I've been known to run in the exact opposite direction from the voice of God.

When I read the stories of great Bible heroes like Moses or other prophets like Jonah, I realize I'm not much different than them. Moses came up with something like 5 objections as to why God should choose someone else to lead God's Chosen People out of Egypt and Jonah got in a boat and sailed in the exact opposite direction from the city of Nineveh where God had called him to go. God had to chase me down all the way to the frozen tundra of Alaska before I heard His voice. While I'm on a rant here, there's another thing... In the Bible when God speaks it's usually pretty clear who is talking. I mean Moses saw God in a burning bush and Jonah in the storm and the really big fish. Wouldn't it be nice if God would just show himself and speak loud and clear so there would be no ambiguity?

In seminary, we spent a lot of time talking about discerning God's voice and God's call. I love this story about Samuel because it shows our humanity and

God's persistence. When God first called Samuel's name he thought it was his religious supervisor, Eli calling. It took God three attempts before even Eli, a lifelong religious man, could discern that the voice Samuel heard was the voice of God. If it took four times before God could get through to these two people who had dedicated their lives to serving God and literally lived in the Church building 24/7, then how much harder is it for God to get through to the rest of us who are busy living lives outside of Church? Wouldn't it be nice if God's Word came with a label in large capital letters that read, FROM GOD! In Samuel's case, he had an older more spiritually adept mentor and teacher. Eli even told Samuel what to say when God spoke, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Because we're steeped in so many distractions or jaded by previous experiences or just too intellectual to believe in ancient religions, we need an Eli in our lives to help us hear and respond to God when God calls our name.

Today, God called little Marie's name. God has filled her with the Holy Spirit and given her many gifts to share with the world as she grows up. In the ritual of her Baptism just a few minutes ago, I asked you all if you would promise to help her parents and her sponsors to fulfill the Baptismal promises. When you replied, "We will," you were agreeing to be Eli's to Marie. She will need every one of you to help her discover God's Word for her life. When she begins to ask if this idea or that potential action is from God, she has all of us in this house today to

help her discern if the path she is contemplating is of God or not. In today's secular society, it's becoming harder and harder to determine which, which is which... How can we mentor, not just Marie, but every other child of this congregation if we ourselves are not seeking the heart and mind of Jesus Christ ourselves? Jesus said his sheep hear and recognize his voice, but that's near impossible to do if you're not in a close relationship with our Shepherd. By that I mean daily prayer where you don't just ask for stuff, but actually listen and meditate. It used to be very popular to wear a bracelet with the acronym WWJD, What Would Jesus Do. I like asking that question a lot, but for so many people today, that would be a hard or impossible question to answer because they haven't spent enough time with Jesus to know what Jesus would do.

Today God's voice has spoken loud and clear. There is no ambiguity about what happened earlier in this worship service. God claimed his daughter Marie. Each of us who are also Baptized have likewise been claimed by God and forgiven of all sin. In religious talk we say that God has freed us from our bondage to sin, death, and the devil. Marie's Baptism is a reminder to all of us that God still works through us to continue spreading the Good News of our liberation from that unholy trinity. We are indeed freed from our sin, from eternal death, and from the wiles of the devil, but that doesn't mean life will be all lollipops and rainbows. I mean the first word God spoke to Samuel was about the punishment of his mentor Eli's

family. Following God's call on your life will not be a bed of roses. Jesus didn't call his disciples to a life of ease, growing old in your rocking chair. He said take up your cross and follow. That call to follow is relentless and seemingly never ending. Marie is just a child and God has already called her name. Abraham was 75 when God called him to leave his kindred and go to a place that only God knew. Moses was 80 years old when God spoke through the burning bush.

What is God calling you to do now? Can you hear God calling your name in the night? When you hear God call, who is your Eli, helping you to discern it's really and truly God calling and not the devil? The Word of God is rare in these days, but not because God has stopped speaking. God's Word is rare because people have stopped listening, but not so for you all. May you continue to hear God calling your name in the night. May you have the spiritual enlightenment to discern God's Word from the call of the world. May we all continue to do our utmost to keep the Baptismal promises we've made to Marie and every other child of God within our influence. May God never stop speaking to our listening ears and guiding us through the Holy Spirit acting in and through all the Eli's in our lives. With God's grace, we will all be good mentors and Eli's to Marie and every other child of this Congregation. Amen.