

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Epiphany 2B Midweek + January 18, 2012
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Word of the Lord Comes Near

The Word of the Lord from 1 Samuel 3: "And the Word of the LORD was rare in those days." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. The Days of Samuel

The Word of the Lord is rare in the early days of Samuel. There hasn't been a strong prophet since Moses, about 400 years before. Where there is no Word of the Lord, the people stray from the Lord. No, that's true, but it's the cart before the horse. Where the people stray from the Lord and His Word, the Word is hard to find. It's not that the Lord desires to be silent and distant for long periods of time, so that He inflicts unbelief and apostasy on people. Rather, He always offers His Word to be heard; but if the people do not want to hear it, He does not force it upon them. The Law is always preached, of course: if it's not preached from the mouth, it's preached by the conscience and by all of creation. So when people don't want to listen to God, they still hear His Law; but sadly, they deprive themselves of the news of His Gospel and grace.

Israel is in dire straits when Samuel is a boy. They've been invaded and raided again and again as God's judgment for their sin, and they've been rescued again and again by the judges God has sent because God is faithful. But His Word is seldom heard because people do not want to hear it. You need look no further than the tabernacle, where the high priest is Eli and his assistants are his sons, Hophni and Phineas. Eli is a nice enough guy, too nice to be high priest: he's all about nice and not about obedience. He lets his sons run wild. They abuse the sacrificial system, taking for themselves what people bring to offer to God. They use nearby women for their personal gratification. That is what the Israelites see at the tabernacle, at the place of God's presence among them: and if that's what's going on at the tabernacle, how do you think things are in the rest of the land?

No, things are bad in Israel. The Word of the Lord is rarely heard.

But the Lord will not forsake His people.

One of His people is a boy named Samuel, dedicated by his mother to the Lord's work from infancy. He's been living at the tabernacle since he's been old enough to leave his mother. In fact, it sounds from our text that he's living *in* the tabernacle: he is "lying down in the temple of the Lord," in the Holy Place next to the Holy of Holies, the throne room of God on earth. It's a strange place to bed down, and it should never be permitted, but that's where we find Samuel when the Lord calls.

The Lord calls Samuel. That's what the text says, and Samuel thinks it's Eli. That tells us that this isn't a thundering voice from heaven, but that the Lord speaks here with the voice of an ordinary man. If we want to indulge in a little pious speculation, perhaps the voice comes from behind the curtain—from the Holy of Holies? We don't know. The text doesn't say. But that is where the Lord has promised to be for His people on earth.

At any rate, Samuel thinks that it is Eli who calls, and so he runs to the high priest. Eli sends him back to bed. The Lord calls Samuel a second time—calls him by name: Samuel runs to Eli, who sends him back to bed again. The third time, Eli catches on: he realizes that the Lord is calling Samuel, so he sends the boy back to bed once again with the instructions, "Go, lie down, and if He calls you, you shall say,

'Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears.'" When the Lord calls a fourth time, that's precisely what Samuel does. And though the Word of the Lord is rare in the land, the Lord speaks to Samuel.

When the Lord speaks and reveals, He doesn't want His Word kept a secret, but gives it in order to be repeated to others. The first message that the Lord gives to Samuel to repeat is a difficult one, so much so that Eli must threaten Samuel before Samuel repeats it. It's a message of judgment on Eli and his sons: the house of Eli will be destroyed, and Eli and his sons couldn't offer enough sacrifices to make up for their sin if they had forever to do it. But when he hears the Word from Samuel, Eli makes a humble confession of faith, too: "It is the LORD. Let Him do what seems good to Him."

This, of course, is only the beginning of Samuel's life as a prophet. He will grow and be established as a prophet in Israel—the greatest since Moses, and the Lord will let none of his words fall to the ground. He has an important part in God's plan of salvation: through the voice and hands of Samuel, the Lord will ordain David as the king of Israel; and among David's descendants will be Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh for the salvation of the world. There's still a thousand years before the Son of David is born of Mary, but He is already Samuel's Savior because He is coming to die for his sins. When the Messiah comes, He'll find a corrupted temple and a priesthood in such bad shape that the high priest calls for the death of God's Son. He'll die for the sins of the world, and He'll rise again to reign forever. In fact, who else is speaking to Samuel than the Lord Himself, long before the manger in Bethlehem?

II. The Present Day

The Word of the Lord is rare in our present day, too. Christianity is losing its influence in western society, to the point that many try to rewrite the history of Europe and the United States in such a way as to omit Christianity from the story. The Christian faith is often caricatured as a den of superstition, ignorance, hatred or immorality. Where the Church still enjoyed a high level of respect even fifty years ago, it's slowly being banished from the public square. Many are lured away—the young by worldliness and the old by bitterness. This should come as no surprise, nor should it threaten our faith in any way. We look at the history of the world: we see the Lord graciously visiting different kingdoms and nations with His Word so that the faith flourishes and many are saved. Then we see the sinfulness of man reassert itself and gradually get rid of the Gospel as much as possible; and where man doesn't want to hear of Christ and salvation, the Lord does not force it upon him. We give great thanks for the grace that the Lord has poured out upon our land thus far, and we pray that He would grant reformation and revival in our land. But whatever happens, the Lord is faithful to His people.

The Word of the Lord is far rarer than it should be in within Christianity. Large portions of the church on earth teach that you're saved by your works alone, or that your works help Jesus save you. Many pastors have left the Gospel on a shelf in their studies in order to focus on the Law and the practicality of Christianity for solving this world's problems. Others focus on improving the world by electing Christian leaders and enacting Christian legislation, both of which have little to do with the forgiveness of sins. Still others believe that the job of the church is to be like Eli, to approve the sad morality of the world rather than rebuke it. The tragedy here is enormous: when a church leaves the Gospel behind, it eventually ceases to be the Christian Church. However, it still looks like and claims to be the Christian Church. This only opens up the true Church to more ridicule from the world for sticking with the Word, and the devil piles on. This should not surprise us either: the Lord warns of such things in these last days. There will be false churches claiming to be true, and the true Church will suffer for it. The Lord delights to bring His Word to His people. But where people no longer want to hear His Word, He removes that lampstand from them; and in the blindness of sin, they may not realize that it's gone.

That's all pretty sobering stuff. But the Lord is faithful. Perhaps the end is very near. Perhaps it is not, but the Lord is still faithful. And that is why it is good that you are here.

You are here in the tabernacle of the Lord, for the Lord is present here. You're not here to sleep in His presence. You're here to find rest. You hear the Lord's Word, because He speaks it to you. He called Samuel by name in our text: He called you by name in Your Baptism. Now, you hear His Word, graciously preserved and provided by God as His holy Scriptures. You hear His Word—not just for instructions about how to live or for a motivational pick-me-up until next time, but so that you might hear of His grace and mercy for you. Though the Word of the Lord is rare in these days, He pours it out abundantly into your ears and heart here. He tells you that despite the sinfulness of this world and the many who have forsaken Him, He will not forsake you. He tells you that despite the sinfulness and deceit of your own heart, He will not forsake you. Rather, He speaks His Law to call you to repentance, and He speaks His Gospel to keep you as His holy child.

Perhaps the greatest temptations you will face as a Christian are temptations to despair and futility, the doubt that says the Lord isn't faithful. But the Lord destroys that here with His grace. So you pray the prayer that Samuel prayed: "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears." And you hear the Word of the Lord that you might confess your sin and have His grace. You confess with Eli, "Let the Lord do what seems good to Him," and you do so with far more joy than Eli did. For Eli, the message was one of judgment. For you, repentant of your sin, it is one of grace and life and salvation forever.

Dear friends, the Word of the Lord is rare these days. God grant that it not be rare here. For by His Word, the Lord still calls you by name. By His Word, He still feeds you His body and blood for grace and life. By His Word, He tells you that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen