



CALL WAITING

I Samuel 3:1-20, Matthew 7:24-27

Today I am going to share an opening illustration that unfortunately reveals my advancing years. It was a weekly feature on the television show "**Laugh-In**" Lily Tomlin played the telephone operator who began her lines by saying "One ringie-dingie - two ringie-dingies - three ringie-dingies." Then she would say "**Have I reached the person to whom I am speaking?**"

That same phenomenon is happening in our scripture lesson from the Old Testament. We see a young lad called Samuel under the mentorship of Eli the priest. He was being trained at the temple in the ways of God and faith. Eli is very tired - and Samuel is also preparing for a good night's sleep. He is near the Ark of God - which symbolizes the dwelling place of God Almighty. In **verse 4**, a voice pierces the darkness and calls Samuel. He believes it is Eli calling. So in **verse 5** he boogies over to Eli - and says '**Here I am. You called me.**' Eli responds 'I did not call you - go back to sleep.' **One ringie-dingie.**

In **verse 6** again the Lord calls and cries out "Samuel." Samuel once again gets up - reports to duty - only to have Eli once again share '**I did not call you. Go back and lay down, you knucklehead.**' **Two ringie-dingies.**

Now in all fairness to Samuel and Eli – in **verse 1** it does share that the word of the Lord was rare and precious in those days. There were not many visions. So God calls a third time. Once more Samuel was awakened by the call. He reports to Eli again. This time Eli realizes that something special is happening. **On the third ringie-dingie** - Eli realizes that it was God who was calling Samuel.

Eli instructs Samuel to go back and lie down - and when he hears the voice again to answer "**Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.**" So Samuel moves back to his bed. God - in **verse 10** - cries out, "**Samuel, Samuel.**" Samuel does as his mentor Eli instructs and responds "Speak for your servant is listening." Finally God reaches the person to whom he has been speaking.

However, when Samuel listens to what God wants him to do in **verses 11-14** - he wishes that he had put God on call waiting. God tells Samuel that he is about to act to punish Eli and his household and his people for their faithlessness. The word of God

which God calls Samuel to proclaim for his day is a word of judgment against Samuel's own people. It is never easy for a pastor to bring challenging words to those he loves and is called to serve. This is hardly what I would want to tell my mentor and guide in the faith.

So in **verse 15**, Samuel goes back to bed and hopes it was all a bad dream.

However, Eli knows better and realizes there will be consequences to a series of bad choices that he and his political regime have made. At least Eli is willing to accept the judgment of God because he wants the best for his people and nation. The divine imperative is greater and more important than human wisdom.

So that sets the stage for our message.

In that spirit I will be sharing three insights for your consideration and response.

FIRST, GOD HAS NOT GONE OUT OF BUSINESS. HE STILL CALLS.

A few years ago the London Times reported that the number of wild birds were diminishing in London. A study was done to see why they were disappearing. Why was it rare to see them anymore?

It was discovered that the female birds could no longer hear the courting song and voice of the male. There was simply too much noise pollution. Perhaps we human beings are unable to hear the call of God because we are listening to the wrong voices - and we are distracted from hearing the still small voice of God.¹

I believe that while God will not shout at us - his call is still the deepest call of all. Thomas Cahill is a book editor for Doubleday in New York City. He said, "People that I work with would share with me that they have these feelings and longings and appetites that the secular world cannot meet or satisfy. They don't know what to do with them. Their secular vocabulary had no explanation to explain what was happening in their lives. They had to learn there is a difference between bread with a small 'b' and bread with a capital 'B'.

So Cahill set up a place for these people to meet and listen to each other. It is called St. Malachi's Church (The Actor's Chapel) at 48th St. and Eighth Avenue in The Big Apple.² These actors were experiencing what John Wesley called 'the prevenient grace of God.' It is God wooing them into a personal relationship with him. There was something missing that they were longing for in the lives of these actors and artists. It was God. That is exactly what is happening in our lesson for today.

When I was at seminary - I roomed during the week with four much older men - who had given up lucrative jobs in education, business and government to answer a call to ministry they had put on call waiting years ago. God called them to a vocation and not a

career. They chose to climb the ladder of success until they discovered it was the wrong ladder. For some of them - it was more than three ringie-dingies before they answered. The call was not loud - but persistent. And before they knew it – they could no longer tune out the call - and finally heard the deeper call.

One of my Sunday school teachers would often remind us that "If God seems distant in our walk of faith - it is not God who moved." As T.S. Eliot once wrote:

**"Where shall the word be found
Where will the word resound
Not here - there is not enough silence."**

Perhaps that is why in **Psalm 46 verse 10**, we are told "Be still and know that I am God." If the word is rare in our time - we need to become still and silent before God.

SECONDLY, WE NEED TO CULTIVATE A LISTENING EAR.

I have never forgotten a touching scene from the Broadway play, **JOAN OF ARC**. When I heard them, they were like a bolt of lightning to me. Joan of Arc is on trial before the church hierarchy and the king. The king finally shouts at Joan of Arc - "Why do you hear the voice of God and not me? After all - I am the king and not you." Joan of Arc replies "**Because I take the time to listen. I listen with my heart.**"

Joan of Arc is sentenced to death as a heretic and burned to death. The soldier reports back to the officials - everything burned except her heart. Real truth can never be silenced.

I am convinced that the voice of God comes primarily through his word in the Bible - and it speaks both to the ear and the heart. From **Matthew 7:24-27**, we learn the importance of hearing and listening.

I do not believe that Samuel had a hearing problem - but a listening problem. We heard the message from **Matthew 7:24-27** about how to build our lives. The question is - did we really listen to it? Listening is an art form in and of itself.

Can you tell me anything more important to us as a faith community than the will and work of God? Can you share with me anything that is of more importance than your soul? Can you tell me anything more threatening than the fact we can forfeit our soul - for a bigger silo?

Like Samuel the message you receive - and attempt to live out - could be threatening to those whom you love. When you realize that as a Christian you have a calling - you build differently. You listen to a different voice. You hear differently.

Christopher Parkening is one of the world's greatest concert guitarists. At age 30, he was at the top of his profession. His concert schedule booked years in advance. His CD's were best sellers. And then it all stopped. For three years he just disappeared. He stopped recording. He stopped performing. He said he was burned out. So at age 30, in spite of his enormous success, he walked away from the spotlight to pursue the good life in Montana fly fishing. He hoped to find what was missing in his life. He knew something very important was gone. He was increasingly haunted by the emptiness of his dream fulfilled.³

One day a neighbor asked him to go to church. The minister on that Sunday preached a sermon on the Christian life, the ways that we find to avoid living it. Christopher said, "**That's me!**" From that point on, he began to see things differently.

He shares how he was apprehended by the grace of God and found new inspiration for playing.

He holds the position of distinguished Professor of Music at Pepperdine University, where he chairs the guitar department. The most prestigious guitar competition in the world is named in his honor. "Now," he says, "my music has a purpose. Now I can give voice to what I believe in my music." Like Rick Warren would say, he has a purpose in life now. Christopher shares that now at the heart of every performance is a deep commitment to the Christian faith.

Once you have turned up your listening volume - don't be afraid of what God might ask you to do. If you are listening to the Master's voice - then there must be a master plan for your life.

THIRDLY, A CALL IS NOT A CALL UNTIL IT IS ANSWERED.

A response is necessary. In a sense we return God's call. It is not a call we return in proxy - but we return it in person. Yes, Samuel was called out of silence into God's service.

I am convinced that if the people of Evangelical United Methodist Church – New Holland - would say "**Here I am, Lord, your servants hear and now report for duty**" - that by next fall a difference would be felt in our community.

Some of you are aware that our Long-Term Strategic Planning Committee is busy at work for the renewal of our church. We are presently studying a book by Bishop Robert Schnase entitled **FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL CONGREGATIONS.**

Bishop Schnase has identified 5 practices that shape and sustain a church for fruitful service to God. They are all biblically-based and theologically sound:

Radical hospitality
Passionate worship

**Intentional faith development
Risk-taking mission and service
Extravagant generosity**

On page 27 in the book he reminds us that “a system produces what it is designed to produce.” He further reminds us that it will not get any other kind of results unless something changes. He then asks the challenging question, “**How is your church doing?**”⁴ He further shares “that if a mainline church had set up a task force and asked its members to work late into the night to develop a congregational plan that would cause attendance to fall by 5% each year and the median age to increase each year, they would come back with a plan that looks exactly like what their church is doing now.”⁵ He further shares, “too many churches want more young people as long as they act like old people, more newcomers as long as they act like old-timers, more children as long as they are quiet as adults.”⁶ While these thoughts from Bishop Schnase are challenging – much like the words Samuel had to share with Eli – they are words that will lead to our renewal.

Your Long-term Strategic Planning Committee is working overtime to be sure that we not only read the words and wisdom from Bishop Schnase’s book, but we will listen to them and act upon them. We invite your participation with us in this journey of renewal. As Joan Delp said last Sunday, “**We better get busy!**”

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. We know from Matthew’s gospel, that Jesus, the Son of God was tempted by Satan, the Great Deceiver and Father of Lies.

Jesus heard the offers from Satan, but he only listened and submitted himself to the authority of God. The same offers come to all of us. As baptized, born again believers we are not tax-exempt from temptations. As a matter of fact, it is after Jesus is baptized and has accepted his mission that the temptations occur. Jesus declares, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.”

Is there a **call** waiting for you (us) to respond to? I (we) believe there is. If you belong to Christ - or want to belong to Christ - there is a call to answer – work to do – and a life to be lived.

**One ringie-dingie!
Two ringie-dingies!
Three ringie-dingies!
Have I reached the person to whom I am speaking?**

May God give you the courage to answer and respond.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
February 10, 2008

ENDNOTES

1. **"Preaching Magazine,"** July-August, 1997 edition, page 3, from an address given by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

² Thanks to Mark Trotter for this material. This is my adaptation of it.

³ From the album (CD cover), **GRACE LIKE A RIVER**, by Christopher Parkening. Thanks to Pam Setlock for sharing the information with me and her husband Wally for introducing me to the music of this great musician on the way to a Penn State football game.

⁴ Robert Schnase, **FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL CONGREGATIONS**, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 2007, page 28.

⁵ Ibid Schnase, page 27.

⁶ Ibid, Schnase, pages 27-28.