

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany: Holy Trinity Church: January 14, 2018**

**1 Samuel 3: 1-20: *Speak Lord For Your Servant Is Listening***

**Preached**

**By**

**The Rev. John E. Higginbotham**

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**I read a story about a man named, Jed Harris. Jed was a successful producer of plays. One of his successful works was the production of Thornton Wilder’s play, “Our Town.” In the middle of a lengthy season mixed with the intense pressure of many details, Harris began to lose his sense of hearing. He could not even hear what other people close to him were saying and so he was missing crucial details during conversations. As a result, Jed Harris decided to pay a visit to a renowned audiologist who listened attentively as the producer narrated the sad account of his declining ability to hear. After a thorough examination of Harris’ ears, the hearing specialist drew out from his vest an expensive gold plated pocket watch and placed it against the producer’s ear. “Do you hear this watch ticking?” the audiologist asked. “Absolutely,” the producer responded. The audiologist moved farther away and held the watch**

up to his office door. Harris focused and remarked, "Yes, it is quite audible." The doctor then walked into the next room and asked, "how about now?" "It's still audible," Harris replied. The doctor walked back into the office and returned the watch to his vest. "This phenomenon is quite commonplace," he said, "especially among successful people. Your hearing is excellent Mr. Harris. You have simply quit listening."

My sisters and brothers, do you know anyone like that? They don't have a hearing problem, but they most certainly do have a listening problem.

Obviously some people do have hearing problems. That happens, of course, especially later on in life, but not nearly as often as people missing messages simply because they do not listen to one another.

Robert Holden, in his book, *Happiness Now*, tells a story about a husband and wife, both in their late seventies, who decided, after fifty-five years of marriage, to divorce. When their counselor asked them why, the wife issued a catalogue of reasons. "He never asks if I'm happy," said the wife. "I assumed you were," said the husband. "He never says he loves me," said the wife. "I thought you knew I loved you," said the husband. The wife continued, "He never says I'm beautiful." The husband replied, "I look at you every day and admire your beauty." "We rarely talk," said the wife. "I know you like to read

a lot,” said the husband. “I read because we don’t talk,” said the wife. There was a pause. “And we never go out,” said the wife. “I thought you liked to stay in,” said the husband. “I only stay in because I’m waiting to go out,” said the wife. The counselor continued to take notes. “He’s also very mean to me,” said the wife. “In what way?” asked the counselor? “Well, at breakfast, three times a week for fifty-five years, he always serves me the crust of the loaf, and I hate the bread-crust!” The husband was distraught, “I give you the crust, my dear, because that is my favorite part of the loaf.” My brothers and sisters, what we have here, is a failure to communicate.

**My sisters and brothers, communication is so vital to successful living.**

Women seem to be more conscious of that than men. One national magazine polled over 30,000 women and only one problem ranked above conflicts over money, and that is poor communication. Although many women in the survey chose their partners based on sex appeal, research shows that if they had to do it over again, they said the ability to communicate is much more important.

There is a beautiful story in the Bible about someone who spent a lifetime listening. In his case, he was listening to God. Most of you remember the story of the boy Samuel from your CCD or Sunday school days. It begins with the very touching scene of a holy woman named Hannah pleading with God to

allow her to bear a son because she is barren. Hannah made a vow to God that if God would allow her to bear a son; she would give the boy to the service of God all the days of his life. Some time passed and God answered Hannah's prayer. She conceived and bore a son, and named him Samuel, saying, "Because I have asked for him from the Lord." Hannah followed through on her promise to give Samuel to God. As soon as he was weaned, Samuel was placed under the care and training of an old priest named Eli. Eli was gradually losing his vision. But he was faithful in his teaching of young Samuel. He also gave Samuel light duties around the tabernacle. One night when Samuel was about 11 years old, he had a life-changing experience. He was lying down there in the house of the Lord, trying to go to sleep, when he heard a voice in the night. He ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down. Again the voice called, "Samuel!" And, once again, Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call you; go back and lie down." Now Samuel had been studying about God, the story indicates, but he did not yet know God: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

My sisters and brothers, that is very interesting, don't you think? Could there be many people including many adults in church, who have studied about

**God, but do not know God? I wonder. Maybe it's because we have not been listening for God's voice. A third time this voice in the night called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then, says the Scripture, Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if God calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."**

**My brothers and sisters, this is truly a beautiful story from the Hebrew Scriptures about the call of one of Israel's great prophets. God spoke; Samuel listened. The 19<sup>th</sup> verse of this chapter says, "The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground." In other words, Samuel who listened to God had a lifelong relationship with God and a fruitful ministry.**

**Today, I want to spend just a few moments dealing with the sacred power of a listening heart. Wonderful things happen when we're willing to listen. The first thing we need to note is that listening is not the same as hearing. Hearing refers to the sounds that enter your ears. It is a physical process that, provided you do not have any hearing problems, happens automatically.**

**Listening, however, requires more than that: it requires focus and concentrated effort. It's work!**

**Some people will not stop talking. But blessed is the person who will not stop listening. That's a wonderful gift to give to someone, to listen to them that intently. The greatest honor you can pay someone is to really listen to them. JUST REMEMBER, AN OPEN EAR IS THE ONLY BELIEVABLE SIGN OF AN OPEN HEART (X2). Listening is not the same as hearing. Listening requires intent. Listening requires concentration. Listening requires focus. One common problem is that instead of listening closely to what someone is saying, we often get distracted after a sentence or two, and instead we start to think about what we are going to say in reply. This means that we do not listen to the rest of what the other person is saying. You can see how treacherous this can be. But I think we can all agree: hearing is not the same thing as listening. Listening to someone is a way of saying you are important to me. You matter.**

**Of course, the most important listening we can do is to listen to God. It is interesting how much time Jesus spent in prayer. Obviously he believed listening to the voice of God was important. It's God's deepest wish to direct all of God's children toward positive, fulfilling lives. But most of us never**

**listen. And so we miss out on some of life's greatest joys. If you and I were truly listening to God, we would see wonderful things happening in our lives.**

**Hearing isn't the same thing as listening. When we listen to someone we are saying you are really important to me. You matter. God's deepest wish is to direct us to a positive and fulfilling life. If that's not happening in our lives, it is because we are not listening to Him. Remember what St. Paul said in his letter to the Romans 10:17, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ". Notice that Paul did not say that faith comes from talking or doing. My sisters and brothers, faith comes from hearing and that only happens when we listen. The old prophet Eli told young Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if God calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"**

**Our challenge is to pray, "Speak Lord for your servant is listening." What an eloquent, yet powerful prayer. Are you listening to the people around you who love you, especially those closest to you? More importantly, are you listening to God? If so, a positive, fulfilling and purpose filled life awaits you. So, just listen. AMEN.**