

“God Speaks”

And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant hears” (I Samuel 3:10).

Our entire theology is based on the premise that God speaks to us. Think about this for a moment. Every thread and stitch of the faith in which we are clothed is tied to the belief God that speaks to us through Scripture. Without this living and active word, the knowledge of a God who loves us, forgives us, and gives us eternal life remains hidden. So today, as confessing Christians gathered around the revealed truth of God’s word, the question is not, “Does God still speak?” Instead, the question that impacts us today and carries an eternal weight is this: “Are we listening?”

To truly consider this question and how it relates to today’s text from I Samuel, we need to know some background to Samuel’s story. In the verses that lead up to Samuel’s amazing conversation with God in today’s reading, we are introduced to a man named Eli who served as the high priest and was in charge of the Tabernacle. This meant that Eli oversaw the sacrificial system of Israel through which God delivered forgiveness to His people. We also learn that Eli had raised Samuel after the boy’s mother Hannah dedicated her firstborn son to the Lord, and in many ways, Eli had been a father to Samuel. Yet Eli also had two sons of his own.

Eli’s sons were named Hophni and Phinehas, and in the second chapter of I Samuel we are told that these two sons, who also served as priests of the people, were corrupt in every way. As representatives of the priestly line, these two men held great power among the people, but instead of using their office to intercede for the people and bring them the comfort of God’s Word, they abused their priestly role in despicable ways. They embezzled from the tabernacle offerings, they used their positions of power to take sexual liberties with “the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting” (I Samuel 2:22) and, as we are plainly told in I Samuel 2:12, “they had no regard for the Lord.”

Hophni and Phinehas were utterly arrogant and completely indifferent to God’s Word. They paraded their sins in front of the people, they made a mockery of the priesthood, and they publicly brought dishonor to God. Knowing this, you would expect Eli to bring swift and severe discipline to his sons, but instead, Eli gave them a slap on the wrist, and rather than removing them from their positions of power and punishing their sin, Eli continued to look the other way. So finally, the Lord stepped in, and He declared a death sentence on Eli and his sons, removing the priesthood from their family line and, ultimately, placing the responsibility of Israel’s leadership on Samuel himself.

The story of Eli and his shameless sons is about as sensational as it gets, but aside from the shock value of this Old Testament scandal, there is an important message for us today. You see, we are more like Eli and his sons than we’d like to admit. Today, I am preaching to Christian people; people who profess a belief in Scripture as the inspired Word of God; people who trust in the Cross of Jesus Christ for forgiveness and life and salvation. And yet today, this sanctuary is filled with people – and pastors – who have failed to listen the voice of the Lord.

We know what the Bible teaches. Many of us grew up in the church and were confirmed in the faith and confess the teaching of the Apostles, and yet we still live in a way that shows a disregard for the Lord’s voice. We minimize our transgressions, we justify our behavior, we excuse our disobedience, and we sit comfortably in our sin – not hearing and not listening to God’s word.

Today's Epistle reading from I Corinthians provides a perfect platform for confronting this kind of superficial Christianity in all of us. Here, Paul tells us that the body is not meant for sexual immorality and yet, on this point, we have not listened to God's voice. We've allowed our culture to set the standards for our sexuality. We've bowed to the world's definition of morality. And even for Christians, sexual intimacy before marriage has been normalized and extramarital affairs are commonplace. Today, God clearly tells us, "Flee from sexual immorality" and this is a message from the Lord we must hear. The actions of our bodies should match the confession that comes from our lips but the truth of the matter is, that they don't! And even if we haven't physically acted against this Word from God, we all stand condemned by it because we know what's in our hearts. And that's why today's text is so important.

You see, in the story of Samuel, we see what it means to truly hear God. And one of the first things this story teaches us is that we need to be where God promises He is present. In his Explanation of the Third Commandment, Luther wrote, "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word but hold it sacred and gladly hear it and learn it." And the promise of God is that, in worship, He speaks to His people. In fact, this is the primary purpose of worship – not that we sing or pray or give our offerings – but that God comes to us in His Word – to teach us, to convict us, to instruct us, and, most importantly, to forgive us.

And, just as Samuel rested in the house of the Lord, when we come together in worship, we are in His presence; gathered around His Word, fed by His Sacrament, and He promises that here He is speaking to us, and that here He is acting for us! No matter how sinfully we have lived, no matter how weak and uncertain our hearts may be, and no matter how much shame or guilt we may feel, today, in His Word, God is working to accomplish His saving purpose.

And, as we leave God's house and re-enter the world around us, this story of Samuel should also encourage us to consider the ways we listen to God's voice throughout the week. We can read the Bible. We can memorize verses. We can study Scripture with others who can help us in our walk with the Lord. In an age when temptation is just a click away, the same can be said for the strength that comes from God's voice. This week, hundreds of people from Emmanuel will gather in Bible studies, whether here at church, together in their homes, or in some local coffee shop, and they will share their struggles and they will be encouraged by other brothers and sisters who speak promises of God. And, when they do these things, they will be hearing the voice of the Lord.

In His word of judgment against Eli, God condemned Eli's sin and He ripped the priesthood from his family, and yet, in the middle of this harsh confrontation, God also made a promise that He would, "raise up...a faithful priest, who would do according to what is in God's heart and mind" (I Samuel 2:35). This prophecy of a perfect priest was realized in part with the Lord's call to Samuel, but ultimately this promise was and still is fulfilled in Jesus, and my friends, through the Word of Christ, our perfect Priest still speaks! And the message that He has for you is a message of life, it is a message of love, it is a message of acceptance, and it is a message of forgiveness given to you freely in Christ Jesus Who died for your sins and was raised to life to give you heaven.

Today, God speaks. And today, as you listen to His voice, you are being saved. Go with the peace of this promise God has spoken to you today, and all God's people say, Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold