

Pentecost 4B
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Trinity Episcopal Church
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Holy Listening

1 Samuel 3: 1 – 20; Mark 2: 23 – 3: 6

A priest friend of mine once suggested that the title for today's reading about the boy Samuel should be "*The Danger Of Sleeping In Church*," and he shared an old story about a parishioner who kept falling asleep during the sermon. The preacher got so frustrated that, one Sunday, he introduced a little twist. As usual, he started in a monotone. Sure enough, the man fell into a deep sleep. The priest then said quietly, "*Everyone who wants to go to heaven, stand up.*" Everyone stood ... except, of course, the man who was fast asleep.

The priest then signaled for everyone to sit down, and gently said, "*Everyone who wants to go to hell...*" and with a bang on the pulpit, he shouted "*stand up!*" The sleeping man jumped to his feet, looked at all the people sitting around him, then at the priest, and said, "*Reverend, I don't know what we're voting on. But it looks like you and me are the only ones for it.*"

Of course, young Samuel was *supposed* to be sleeping. Years before, his mother, Hannah, had brought him to the Temple. She wasn't able to have children, so she promised God that if she did, she would give her child to priestly service. So Samuel was born, and when he was twelve years old, she brought him to the high priest Eli to live in the Temple.

It was a relatively quiet period in Israel's history with no wars, no threats from hostile neighbors. In fact, the faith that had sustained the people through centuries of slavery, the exodus from Egypt, a generation of wandering in the wilderness, and finally settling in the promised homeland, was now reduced to rote and routine. As the scripture says, "*The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.*"

Samuel is asleep in his assigned position near the Ark of the Covenant, when a voice comes in the early morning darkness: "*Samuel ... Samuel.*" He assumes it's Eli calling, because he's called like this before – old and nearly blind, he often needs help. After three times of being told it's not Eli, he keeps listening, but according to the text, he was "*...young and did not yet know God.*" He needed someone wiser, someone who had spent more time cultivating a relationship with God, to see what was right in front of him.

So through Eli, he eventually realizes it's God's voice. Samuel responds, "*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*" And the rest is history. The young boy goes on to become one of Israel's great prophets, like Moses and Abraham.

Of course, the real challenge we face is not the danger of sleeping in church. After all, we have a pretty good time here, don't we? We're pretty attentive: We listen to what each other has to say – well, usually anyway. And we certainly don't shame anyone who falls asleep when Mary Beth or I am preaching – although we *do* notice.

No, the real challenge is how easy it is to *stop* listening for that small still voice of God, not just here in church, but when we leave this place. It's the danger of getting so caught up in our lives, by our own immediate needs and those of our families and friends, and so bombarded by outside demands, that we forget the bigger picture. We make our lists, and if self – care, and quiet time with God, and serving God's people even manage to make it onto the list, they're usually at the very end.

Which is why Jesus' message about the sabbath in today's gospel is so potentially life – giving. By standing up against religious traditions that had become irrelevant, and proposing that we put the needs of God's people first, Jesus redefines the whole purpose of religion. Instead of turning healthy rituals like the sabbath and the importance of healing into rareties, reserved for some particular time or place, Jesus' point is that these are supposed to be *daily practices* that serve the needs of God's people, that they are the *essence* of being faithful. Taking time for rest and self – care; arranging access to food for those who hunger; and healing ourselves and our neighbors from all that harms them – these are *core* responsibilities of people of faith; they're *central* to our identity as Christians.

In fact, as church, it's our having lost sight of the primacy of the needs of God's people, and the primacy of healing our world, that has led to so many people deciding that church is irrelevant.

Which brings us back to listening. As Christians, we're called to a special kind of listening – listening for the presence of God in our own hearts, and to God's call to care for ourselves, made in God's image; listening for God in the hearts of others – for what God desires for each person we meet; listening for God in the heartbeat of our world, for what God desires for our neighborhoods, our country, our planet. And as we listen, seeking out the Eli's in our community, those who invest more time in their relationship with God, so that we can learn to hear God in all aspects of our lives.

Believe me, this kind of listening is deeply counter cultural. It rejects the conventional wisdom that we should listen only for what will benefit *us*, or advance the agenda of our own group. It runs counter to what many people still believe about church – that it's simply a quiet respite from a harsh world. We are that, of course, but we are a whole lot more. Because as followers of Jesus, we remember that the *reason* God calls us to gather in this kind of oasis, is so that, rested and renewed, we will go forth from this place with joy, to love and serve God's people and God's world.