

Pastor Chris Matthis  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Epiphany 2, Series B  
Saturday, January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Sunday, January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018

**Sermon: Speak, Lord!**

**Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-10**

Focus Statement: God speaks to us in his Word.

Function Statement: That they would listen to God's voice in his written Word.

Sermon Structure: Story-Framed

Doctrinal Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it" (SC, Third Commandment).

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

Annie Dillard tells of a neighbor, a young man in his thirties named Larry, who was trying to teach a stone how to talk. She describes the stone:

"It is—for I have seen it—a palm-sized oval beach cobble whose dark gray is cut by a band of white which runs around and, presumably, through it.... He keeps it on a shelf. Usually the stone lies protected by a square of untanned leather, like a canary asleep under its cloth. Larry removes the cover for the stone's lessons, or more accurately, I should say, for the ritual or rituals which they perform together several times a day.... "No one knows what goes on at these sessions, least of all myself.... Reports differ on precisely what he expects or wants the stone to say. I do not think he expects the stone to speak as we do, and describe for us its long life and many, or few, sensations. I think instead that he is trying to teach it to say a single word, such as 'cup,' or 'uncle.' For this purpose he has not, as some have seriously suggested, carved the stone a little mouth, or furnished it in any way with a pocket of air which it might then expel. Rather—and I think he is wise in this—he plans to initiate his son, who is now an infant living with Larry's estranged wife, into the work, so that it may continue and bear fruit after his death."<sup>1</sup>

Teaching a stone how to talk? It sounds like madness or a cheap parlor trick!

But is teaching a stone to talk any less mad than sinful human beings waiting for the living God to speak to us? We strain to listen to the silence, yearning with aching ears and

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 86.

burning hearts for God to utter some oracle that will change our lives. The Bible says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish...” (Prov. 29:18, KJV). So we long to hear that “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12, KJV). But what if it never comes?

When the LORD God, Yahweh, spoke to the people of Israel from Mount Sinai, they could not stand it. God’s Word filled them with dread. “Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die’” (Ex. 20:18-19, ESV).<sup>2</sup>

“They heard God’s speech and found it too loud...,” writes Annie Dillard. “It scared them witless. Then they asked Moses to beg God, please, never speak to them directly again.... And God, pitying their self-consciousness, agreed.”<sup>3</sup> We have been waiting for him to speak again ever since.

For which of us has not wished that God would come down and speak to us—really speak to us—audibly without any trace or hint of doubt, and tell us where to go or what to do? Should I marry this girl? What college should I attend? Should I accept this job offer? Will God heal my cancer? How do I know that God still loves me?

But, as Dillard writes, “It is difficult to undo our own damage, and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave.... We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree.... It could be that wherever there is motion there is noise, as when a whale breaches and smacks the water—and wherever there is

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<sup>2</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

<sup>3</sup> Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 87-88.

stillness there is the still small voice, God's speaking from the whirlwind, nature's old song and dance, the show we drove from town."<sup>4</sup>

In our Old Testament lesson today, we find that "the Word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision" (1 Sam. 3:1b). The people of Israel, who had begged God not to speak to them, had gotten their wish, which just goes to show that we should be careful what we pray for.

Then suddenly, out of the stillness and darkness of night, the voice of Yahweh broke in with light and called to Samuel. "Samuel!"

But the boy Samuel did not yet know God in a personal way, and he did not recognize the word of Yahweh (v. 7). So he dutifully arose and went to his master, the old, decrepit priest Eli, and said, "Here I am!" (v. 4). And poor, old Eli, startled out of a good dream, brushed off the boy and rolled over to go back to bed.

But Yahweh called Samuel again. "Samuel!"

So once again Samuel got up and ran to Eli. "Here I am, for you called me." By this time, Eli was getting rather grumpy, as any of us do when our children wake us in the middle of the night. "Go back to bed!"

But when Yahweh called Samuel the third time, then Eli perceived that something extraordinary was happening. The Lord was calling Samuel! God was speaking to his people once again.

"Go, lie down," he carefully instructed the boy, "and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears'" (1 Sam. 3:9). So Samuel went back to lie down, although I cannot imagine he was able to go back to sleep.

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<sup>4</sup> Dillard, 88.

The fourth time Yahweh came and *stood*, calling, “Samuel! Samuel!”

And Samuel replied, “Speak, Lord, for your servant listens.”

Then God spoke and told Samuel a Word that would cause everyone’s ears to tingle (v. 11). From that day on, the boy became a prophet—the same prophet who one day judged Israel and anointed Saul and David as kings. “And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground... for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the Word of the LORD” (1 Sam. 3:19, 21).

How I wish that God would waken me in the middle of the night, calling my name: “Christopher, Christopher!” I already know the proper response: “Speak, Lord, for your servant hears” (1 Sam. 3:9-10). But if the Lord really spoke to us, how can we be certain that we’d be ready to hear? For, the fact is, God is already speaking. He never stopped speaking. We have just forgotten how to listen.

God never promised to be speak to us directly in audible words, with the anvil hammering down on our eardrums. Of course, the Lord can do anything he likes, and I would not be the first one to try to “put God in a box,” as they say. But God doesn’t promise to speak that way. Yet God’s voice can *always* be heard where he *does* promise to speak: in his Holy Word. For every word of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, is the very Word of God. God’s voice carved in stone, burned into vellum, and copied in pen and ink has been transmitted to us down through the millennia in the books of the Bible. And, according to the apostle Peter, this written Word is a “more sure” Word even than the voice which spoke from the clouds at Jesus’ Baptism and Transfiguration (2 Pet. 1:19).

God speaks whenever the lector reads the Scriptures in public worship. God speaks whenever the pastor preaches the Word of God. God speaks whenever parents read their

children Bible stories as part of their family devotions. God speaks whenever we pray the Psalms or sing hymns based on Scripture. God speaks and speaks and goes on speaking because that is the miracle of the Incarnation: the Word made flesh who dwelt among us (John 1:1, 14).

In Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*, he explains the Third Commandment, to "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy," like this: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it" (SC, Third Commandment). In other words, the best way to keep Sabbath is to not despise God's Word but to seek it out and gladly hear and learn it wherever it can be found. The Word of the LORD was rare in Eli's day—until God called Samuel in the night. But if the Word of the Lord is rare in our day, it is only because we have refused to dust off our Bibles and open our hearts and ears to the message of Holy Scripture.

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." (Heb. 1:1-2a). God speaks to us by his Son, Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, and the living Word of God. Where else can you hear God speak? As Peter answered Jesus long ago, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Jesus' words are life because they are words of forgiveness and peace, written in red, written in the blood of Jesus—a "more sure" Word than any other you could hope to hear.

I have only heard God speak directly to me twice in my life. And I can be certain that it was God's voice interrupting my thoughts, not my own imaginings, because the words he spoke were verses of Scripture I already knew and had memorized long ago. The main way that God speaks is by pointing us to his Word and reminding us all the things he has already said. The

One who called you by name in Baptism calls you still. “Our Lord speaks, and we listen.”<sup>5</sup> That is the pattern of our worship and Christian life. So open your hearts and ears to God’s Word. Prepare yourself. Be ready, so that when you hear God’s voice, you can say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant hears” (1 Sam. 3:9). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Norman Nagel, Introduction, *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House),