



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, January 14, 2018

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

THE REV. ALAN GIBSON

1 Samuel 3:1-20 | Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17 | 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 | John 1:43-51

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“The word of the Lord was rare in those days.”

For the ancient Israelites, there was some strange comfort to be found in this meager level of communication coming from The Almighty. Receiving a word from the Lord was no casual event. Just a limited survey of divine proclamations of Old might leave some people quite happy never to hear a peep out of God.

Noah's word from the Lord contained the less-than-happy news that nearly all life on earth was about to be destroyed, and that it fell to Noah to save what little was to be spared. Then there is Abraham, who with his wife Sarah, after praying and praying and praying for a son, finally get what they want with the birth of Isaac. When the child has grown a little, God asks Abraham to sacrifice this beloved son. A few generations later, Moses, who after a precarious infancy and a tumultuous young adulthood, is told to leave his hard-won, quiet life to liberate a group of ungrateful slaves and lead them to a new home that he will not be allowed to enjoy. Today, we get Samuel's first encounter with God where he learns that the family of his guardian is about to be wiped out. Of course, the Hebrew Scriptures record a few gladsome tidings from On High, but most tend to be rather fearsome. So when the word of the Lord became rare in the days of the young Samuel, many people did not miss it at all.

In spite of the fact that little bad news was coming from heaven, this time of infrequent contact with God was still not very good. In addition to a spiritual drought, the secular society was plagued with problems. Politics in Israel in the 10th century B.C. was corrupt and self-serving. The power centers of the world were in flux, with new threats coming over every horizon. The economy was grossly skewed to make the rich richer, and the poor desperate. And the religious establishment was generally seen as immoral or irrelevant. Where have we seen this before?

As bad as things were, it was not a hopeless time. There was a longing for something greater -- not just something fleeting like prosperity or security, but truth, and a sense that who we are, and what we do, really matter. There was a fundamental longing for God. In the middle of this mess, some people were looking for a call, a purpose, a word.

In the story of Samuel we see what started as a nearly total absence of any awareness of God, ending with an entire nation hearing the word of the Lord. This revelation would make some, and break others. Samuel called kings and priests to be accountable to the

people entrusted to their care. He held up the poor by demanding justice, not by offering hollow promises. He rallied a nation, not to its own isolating defense, but to be a living symbol of God's presence with all people, even people they had never seen, whose language they did not know, or whose culture was foreign to them. With Samuel, things changed for the better, at least for a short while. He is a hero of the faith who did not hear the word of God as something to be dreaded, but as a life-giving force.

We can look at this story and long for such authority in our time. We can ask where, today, is such a person who will respond to God's call and stand up as a witness to the truth, not ego-driven ambition. Yes, our world does need strong, self-giving leaders, but isn't something of a cop-out to expect someone else to step into this role? Why must we look to somebody else for this witness? Samuel and every great leader before and after him did not descend from heaven fully-formed. They took the abilities God gave them and put them to work. There are many things we can do and great needs we can meet with our mere mortal powers. We can hear God calling, as plainly as Samuel did, every day, in the people around us who long for the life God offers.

God's Word has been given to us, not in a midnight whisper or a thunder clap, but in a Son whose message is a call to follow him as bringers of hope, justice and love to a world that has been conned into settling for lesser things. Where that call leads may be different for each of us, but the underlying message is the same, “Come and follow.” Hearing the word of the Lord begins when one person allows him or herself to be receptive to what God has to say to them. With every call God makes, God also provides the means and the strength to fulfill it. That was true for Noah and Abraham, Moses and Samuel, Andrew and Peter, Philip and Nathaniel. Why would it be any different for us?

The word of the Lord is always with us. But in order for the call to be heard each of us has to say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,” and then, be ready to get to work.