

"Tingling In Our Ears"

I remember a frustrating experience I had with cell phones awhile back. One day, I was rushing out of the house to get to the office. I scooped up my lunch, my computer, and my cell phone, just like I do everyday. I had a meeting to prepare for, so the timing was sort of mission critical, and it was my rushing around that caused a problem. Shortly after getting to the church my cell phone rang. The caller ID indicated it was my wife, so I answered. Instead of Kelly's voice, it was the voice of our young adult son, Kevin, who was transitioning between living places and back with us for a time. "Kevin," I said, "why are you calling me on mom's phone?" "Because you took mine," he said. "Kevin, that's not possible," was my response. "I'm talking to you on my phone, right now." "No, dad, you're talking on my phone," he said calmly. "I called my phone using mom's cell. Dad, take a close look at the phone in your hand," he suggested. I did, realizing how similar in appearance his phone and my phone were. "Son, you're right," I said. "I grabbed the wrong one. I'm holding yours. I'm sorry. You can just use my cell phone today." "Not possible," was his comeback, "because you took yours, too." That seemed crazy to me. I said, "Why would I do that? 'I'm hanging up,'" Kevin said, "and I'll call your number. Let's see what happens." Which is when another cell phone, my cell phone it turned out, began to ring in the pocket of the jacket that was hanging in the corner of my office. Yep, I had both phones. Kevin needed to get to work and he had to have his phone, so we agreed to meet, each driving halfway, so he could get his phone back into his hands and to work on time. After all of that, my morning schedule was a mess. The rushing around made things worse and I was rattled instead of prepared for the tasks that were at hand. How amazing, there I was with two high-tech communication devices but, as it turned out, I was not connected, at all, in the way I thought I was.

Wrong assumptions and confusion seriously degrades communication. There's a lesson in this about how we live our lives and especially in the way we go about our lives of faith. Communication with God is critical to how we experience what God is doing. Sometimes, we assume everything is in place to make our connection with God solid but the reality may be we aren't as hooked in as we think we are. Sometimes, we may not even expect God to call or we are confused about what God is saying to us. The result is not just a rattled morning but a life that is more anxious or scattered, instead of a life that is assured of God's guiding presence. Today's message of the bible points to the importance of realizing God is calling to us and God is persistent in making that connection. It all begins with listening. At the start of the bible we're told in the Book of Genesis that God spoke and God's words brought creation into being. Through the progression of history, it was the words of the prophets which opened the ears of the people to God's message. Jesus, himself, is the Word of God in human form and throughout his teaching the Spirit implored the disciples to listen to him. Even at the end of the bible, in the Book of Revelation, it is the words of God that describe the new thing God is doing. When it comes to faith, open ears connect open hearts to God's voice. It's obvious, I know, but we will not hear the voice of God if we are not listening for it.

The story of Samuel begins with God's call and it is Samuel's ability to hear that call that is key. We enter the story when Samuel was a young man serving in the temple. He's there because his mother, Hannah, was so blessed by Samuel's birth she dedicated his life to God. For many of us, this is how we are first connected to the faith. Our parents or grandparents, our families or other supportive folks in our lives, surround us with the traditions of faith, and whether we are born into it or introduced to it, a God connection is a given. This is the way it was for Samuel. The temple was like his second home. He was completely comfortable in that sacred space, even sleeping next to the Ark of the Covenant, which was believed to contain the actual holy presence of God. All of this is to say that Samuel was well suited to hear God when God called but instead, Samuel was confused, at least at first. He assumed the old priest, Eli, was calling, because that's what always happened. Eli called and Samuel came running. This was the pattern, day after day. The priest called and Samuel responded. In today's story, Samuel hears a call and, just like the ringing of a bell, he runs to Eli. I've heard it said by people who've lived near a railroad track for a long time that they get conditioned to the sound. They don't even notice the clacking of the wheels on the track or the blast from the engine's horn. The sound becomes part of the background of their lives. Samuel was so conditioned to jump and run to Eli that even the voice of God brought the same routined response. Until Eli told Samuel that it could be God who was calling. The old priest, well beyond his best days and knowing his senses were dulled to most things, helped Samuel listen in a new way, and that's when the voice of God broke through.

There have been a handful of Christian writers and teachers who, in the course of my life and ministry, have helped me hear the truths of our faith in a new way. Has that happened for you? Are there insights you've gained or fresh thinking you've discovered that has moved your walk of faith to a new place? There is a basic truth to acknowledge here. Quite simply, it's the fact that God speaks to us in new ways. I say this is a basic truth but our assumptions about God can dim our hearing. In other words, we Christians sometimes have the assumption that God has already said everything God has to say. We sometimes assume we already learned it, or read it, or know it, and

once we have it, is the assumption, there's nothing new from God we need. Like running to Eli because that's what we've always done, there are times when we turn to the old lessons or the old traditions and fail to perceive the new thing God is saying. Oh, the story of Samuel is about the new thing God is saying and doing. Eli represented the old way, a faith that depended on the routines of the priests and the traditions of temple life. Samuel is called by God to be the first of the prophets. God is doing a new thing in him and God's word through the words of Samuel will create new possibilities for faithfulness. Over and over, the bible wants us to know that the God who created and called all things into being in the beginning is the same God who continues to call new things into being in us and in our world. Has God spoken in the past. Absolutely. Did God's word shape the ancient people in response to the context of their lives and world? You bet. And now, our ability to listen and to be open to the new word God is speaking in the context of our lives is the process God uses to shape and lead us in this faith.

One of the first things God tells Samuel is that the word God will speak through him will tingle the ears of everyone who hears. Tingling ears are the sign that God is ready to speak. Some folks have a constant ringing in their ears which is a very troublesome and difficult physical problem. I'm sensitive to that and want to be clear, we're not talking about our physical ears today. Instead, when our ears of faith are tingling it means we are ready to hear the new thing God speaking to us. Knowing God can speak new things means we are ready to be changed, or to learn, or to grow, or to think differently. We're here on the day before the day that honors Martin Luther King, Jr. Martin would have been 92 years old this year had his health allowed and he had not been assassinated in 1968. King preached a new way and he gave his life for that cause. Now, over 50 years later, we are still working to discern God's words in the midst of racial tension. Some feel that the subject is worn out and that enough has been said, but others believe God is still speaking to us about love and peace and how that word can impact the world today. Samuel would say to us, "In the midst of everything going on today, don't you feel your ears tingling? Won't you listen to the new way God is calling you to work for justice and mercy now?" God is speaking in the midst of the trouble of our day. Our tingling ears of faith should be the sign.

As we've already affirmed, it all begins with listening. That's what Samuel said, "I'm here, Lord. I'm listening." This is a good way to end a sermon and a good way to begin the week. "We're here, Lord and we're listening." Amen.