

“The Word Was Rare”  
I Samuel 3:1-10, Luke 3:1-20  
February 16, 2020

Last month Michael Johnston and I drove down to Yale Divinity School to hear a talk in a series of lectures on the history of Congregationalism, focusing on the Puritans. It was excellent, and if you're interested, the talk can be accessed through a computer link if you happened not to be there. It's well worth the listen.

However, this sermon is not about computer links, nor is it about the Puritans. It's not even about Congregationalism. It's about dreading the treacherous Route 8 roadway north, through Waterbury, on the way home from Yale.

I've lived in Barkhamsted over half of my life. And with in-laws who lived on Long Island, I rapidly became familiar with Route 8, either to hook into I-95 and the Throgs Neck Bridge eventually to the Long Island Expressway, or to drive to the pier in Bridgeport to get on the Port Jefferson ferry. Both routes had their drawbacks, but nothing was worse than driving north to return home, on Route 8, through Waterbury. If you've ever done it, you know exactly what I'm talking about. What a mess!

Having lived in suburban Maryland, where the access ramps to the Beltway are perilously short, and having driven many times on the George Washington Parkway between Alexandria and Georgetown, where the left exits and right exits border on the nonsensical, I am well acquainted with what seems to be the arbitrariness of modern highway design. After a while one learns to live with it, or find another route avoiding the offending portions of road. But given that it now costs billions to construct even the shortest bits of interstate, I never think of whom I should contact in the hope that some one, some day, some where, will actually correct the problems. I always figured, “Who's going to listen to the likes of me?” Even had I found the correct bureaucrat to address, chances are that whoever answers the phone might be polite - to the point of condescension, of course - and my suggestion would go into the circular file - if it even got that far.

Well, somehow the Route 8 north-bound interchange in Waterbury is now the exception. Someone obviously listened to someone else, the monies were appropriated, and Michael sailed

through. Wonders never cease! But it is definitely the exception, because dealing with the powers that be, or even finding out who they are, has always been a frustrating problem.

Believe it or not, God was having the same kind of problem back in the days of the prophet Samuel. God just couldn't get through to anyone to fix an awful mess, and even when God did, the response was basically a shrug - or, as Eli put it in a manner reminiscent of a bureaucrat, "Lemme go back to sleep."

Now as an infant, Samuel had been dedicated by his parents to the Lord's service. As a boy, he lived in the Temple day and night, and learned at the feet of the Israelite priests. Yet when God spoke to Samuel, the boy didn't realize what was happening. And the priests were less than helpful.

Now in case you protest that Samuel was barely a teenager and should not be expected to know what was going on, we also need to remember that the other character in the story was none other than the high priest of Israel. And yet Eli did not realize that God was at work. Of all people, surely the high priest would be able to recognize the voice of the Almighty, right? Well, as that famous Congregationalist from the 19th century, Dwight Moody, once said, "If you don't expect it, you won't get it." If we don't expect God to speak to us, we won't hear Him. The question is not whether God speaks, but whether there is anybody out there listening.

Now I realize that the voice of God can be a confusing phenomenon. Sometimes the very people who detect divine speech react in entirely the wrong way to the message. In today's Gospel lesson from Luke, John the Baptist is very outspoken about God's message for His people in His time. John relays God's word as he understands it, no holds barred. Unfortunately, some people catch the implications of God's purpose and meaning for their lives all too well. So it was not surprising when we read that King Herod, the ruler who was the son of the Herod of the Christmas story - you remember him: he slaughtered the babes of Bethlehem - the new King Herod puts John in prison to shut him up. Herod, like his father before him, realizes that God's Word is dangerous. It moves people to action. It causes ordinary women and men to do extraordinary deeds. God's word is radical in its call to redress the wrongs of the world, to oppose injustices, to struggle for the weak, to befriend the outcast, to comfort the oppressed.

That can be rather heady stuff! I am amazed that Marxists could call religion an opiate, because religion in its basic, pure, and refined form is exactly the opposite. If it offers the vision of a better world to come, it does so with a call to change the world we are in. If belief comforts those who mourn, it also seeks to upset those who are a bit too comfortable to lift a finger to help others. If religion promises peace and rest, it also exhorts us to “Work! For the night is coming.”

Yes, God speaks. Where does God speak? God gives us a number of clues, for those of us who are confused by the many different religions seemingly contradicting each other in our practices, and for those of us who are confused by the personal issues confronting us in our own lives, which rarely come to us in stark clarity, but all too often come in so many indistinguishably nuanced shades.

If we want to hear God speak, God tells us to read. Read and see what God’s prophets did. Learn about how they ministered. Find out what they taught. And wherever that same ministry is pursued today, there is God - speaking still. The sounds of God’s speech don’t have to be flashy, with lots of stained glass windows and fine robes and professional choirs. We don’t need hundreds or thousands of people at worship to testify to its popularity, as if we needed 50% plus one to validate it. In fact, God is speaking wherever or whenever a friend helps another in need to see, to help in the search for a better way, a better life. God is speaking wherever or whenever a captive is set free from bondage, whether that bondage be physical, or emotional, or psychological, or financial. God is speaking whenever the poor are comforted, the meek exalted, the widows and orphans cared for, the oppressed relieved.

So it’s not so much a question of God’s word being rare, though it certainly seemed like it to the Israelites in the time of Samuel. Indeed, God’s people had been going through a difficult time. Their leadership was corrupt, they were fighting among themselves, and there was no one to let them know what God was thinking. That’s why Samuel came, and it was in the nick of time. Not that Samuel fixed everything. Far from it. But Samuel was able to bear witness, in words and actions that the people, who were otherwise quite confused, were sure to understand. For everyone was so busy doing their own thing, that important matters were being neglected.

Wherever God’s will is being carried out, God is there - telling us not just to observe God at work, but to get into the act. Not just to applaud, but to lend a hand. Not just to hear a divine

voice, but to answer the divine call, so that we too might become part of the spreading of the light that comes to us in Epiphany.

For you see, God does not speak to let us know what the truth IS, but to inform as to what is to be DONE in light of that truth. God does not call so that we might be shown the way, but so that we might walk in God's way. God does not appear to us just to offer us life, but so that we, in living the life God has meant for us, can offer life to others.

Let us pray: