

March 19, 2023
Fourth Sunday in Lent



Prelude

Greetings and announcements

WE GATHER FOR WORSHIP

Responsive Call to Worship:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

**Therefore we will not fear,
though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake
in the heart of the sea**

Be still and know that I am God!

**The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.**

Prayer of Praise:

Gracious and loving God,
you are the Source of all that sustains us.
You are compassion, embracing us when we call for mercy.
You are mercy guiding us through anxious times.
You are wisdom, revealing truth to challenge and renew us.
Holy One, you bless us with your presence day by day,
so we turn to you in worship, to seek your blessing once again.
We offer you our love and loyalty, our prayers and our praise,
for you are Love, Light and Life for us,
and we belong to you. Amen.

Unison Prayer of Confession:

**Merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed.
By what we have done,
and what we have left undone
we have not loved you
with our whole heart, mind, and strength;
we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.
In your mercy forgive what we have been,**

**amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be,
so that we may delight in your will
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your holy name.
Amen.**

Assurance of God's grace

Hymn #204 "Thou didst leave thy throne"

WE HEAR GOD'S WORD

Prayer for understanding

READ: 1st Samuel 3:1-10
 1st Samuel 16:1-13

Learning to Listen

I've long been fascinated by this story. We can imagine Samuel, the prophet and priest of the Lord, sitting in Jesse's house while, one by one, Jesse's sons are brought before him. As each young man stands before Samuel, the man of God decries: "Neither has the Lord chosen this one."

How did Samuel know?

The beginning of his story tells us that from a young age, Samuel had learned to listen for, recognize, and obey the word of the Lord. He had learned to recognize the promptings of the Holy Spirit which, in agreement with the Holy Scriptures, tell us "This is it," or, "This is not it." Growing up in the temple, ministering to the Lord, learning under the tutelage of the aged priest Eli, Samuel had learned to listen for the word of the Lord and discern what is acceptable to God.

So, as each son was brought forward, Samuel listened for the Spirit's promptings, and reports: "Neither has the Lord chosen this one."

Until there remains only one son. The youngest. We should recognize the oddity of this detail. What Samuel was doing, was choosing who would be the next king of Israel! Usually such an inheritance would go to the eldest son. But all the eldest sons were not acceptable to God. There remained only the youngest. David. The one tasked with caring for the family's sheep while his other brothers socialized and trained to be soldiers (another quality that one would think advantageous for a king!)

But, of course, as the Lord reminded Samuel, “the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

You see, it had long been part of God’s plan for redemption that his people would be governed by a king. Back in Genesis 17 when God entered into a covenant with Abraham, God promised that Abraham and Sarah would have a son who would become the ancestor of “kings of peoples.” The nation that began as one nuclear family, grew to become a confederacy of 12 tribes which, under God’s chosen king, would be consolidated into one holy nation. A kingdom that would live in their present age as witnesses to a different reality; as witnesses to God’s reality. They would be the representatives of God’s Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven!

So, God would choose a King that would rule His people “according to what is in His heart and in His mind.”¹ A King after God’s own heart.

And, despite what anyone may have expected, God chose the shepherd-poet-musician to be His king.

The word of the Lord may have been rare in those days, but Samuel had learned to listen. To wait. And then to obey.

Having heard the Lord say “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one,” Samuel “took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.”

This all happened around the year 1023 BCE.

Approximately 1,410 years later, around 387 A.D. the word of the Lord was once again “rare in those days.” Although, not for want of hearing.

In 313 A.D., the Roman Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Holy Roman Empire. Churches, cathedrals, and monasteries abounded throughout the Empire’s domain. Stretching even into what we would now call West England and encompassing a place that was called Bannaventa Berniae were, in 387 A.D. a boy by the name of Magonus Sucatus Patricius was born. The Latin nature of his name reveals how entrenched his family was in the world of the Roman Empire! This boy was raised in a church-going family. His father was a deacon. However, that appointment was perhaps more politically and economically driven than it was faith-driven! His father was a wealthy man. He held status and

¹ 1st Samuel 2:35

position within the British province of the Roman Empire. And, as was common in the Christendom world – right up to only a few years ago here in Canada – if one was to be a respectable member of society with influence and comfort, one was also a member of the church.

So, Patricius, along with many others went to church regularly. Because, that is what was expected for respectable members of the community.

Patricius was raised on the stories of the Bible, and the traditions of the Christian faith.

And yet, for all its prevalence, it can be said that the “word of the Lord was rare in those days.” Patricius knew the stories of the Bible, but he didn’t know the Lord. He knew about Jesus, but he didn’t know Jesus. He took part in mass, and regularly shared the body and blood of Christ, but he didn’t enjoy communion with the Lord. He was, what we might call, a “Cultural Christian.” He was a Christian because that’s what was expected.

Ken Follett wrote a series of historical fiction novels that chronicle the evolution of a town in early-medieval Britain. At the centre of the town’s development is the building of a cathedral which effectively turns the town from a “no-place” to a centre of commerce, politics, and religion. One scene is set on a Sunday morning. The only people not in the cathedral are the religious police who walk the streets to make sure that all of the townspeople are in church. Then the reader is taken inside the crowded cathedral as the priests say their prayers, read their scriptures, and do their thing at the front of the sanctuary, while at the back the townspeople engage in their networking, socializing, and business dealings! The word of the Lord was heard, but it made little impact on the hearts and minds of the people!

Nevertheless, just as with Samuel when a boy under the care of Eli, and with David who was relegated to the pastures with the sheep, the Lord was working on the heart and mind of Magonus Sucatus Patricius.

When he was 16 years old, Irish raiders invaded his family’s villa and kidnapped Patricius. He spent the next 6 years as a slave in Ireland. There he served his masters as their shepherd. During this time, in his isolation and loneliness on the hills of Ireland, he began to *learn to listen for and to God*. He began to learn to pray to God and listen for God’s response.

And respond God did.

At night as he slept, God would answer his prayers in his dreams.

Through one of these dreams, God told him that there was a boat in the harbour and his time of exile was over. So, Magonus Sucatus Patricius, who would come to be known as St. Patrick fled from his master and made his way back to his homeland in Britain.

There, he enrolled in school to become a minister of the Roman Church.

Until he had another dream in which a messenger from God was calling him back to Ireland to bring Christ to Ireland. So, he returned to the land of his captivity and began a ministry of church planting, education, evangelizing, and witnessing to the truth of the living and Triune God whom we know in Jesus the Christ.

Patrick learned to listen for God. To wait on God's timing. And, when the call came, to obey.

A crucial piece in St. Patrick's learning to listen for and to God, and to interpret his dreams and circumstances in accordance with God's will was that St. Patrick knew the written Word of God. He had not only committed much of the Bible to memory, he had so internalized it, that the scriptures not only directed his emotional reactions, his thoughts, and his physical actions, but they directed his speech patterns. He came to be known as "the man of one book."

The written Word of God allowed him to hear the Living Word of God, Jesus of Nazareth.

Listening for the Word of the Lord is not something reserved for the contemplatives, or the mystics, or those who practice transcendental meditation. It's not an other-worldly experience of which only those of high spiritual development can hear. God speaks today – as He always has – through the words that have been written down, compiled, edited, translated, and handed on from one generation to the next in the pages of Scripture.

The written Word of God allows us to hear the Living Word of God.

When we come to the Bible from the perspective of faith: from believing the Triune God is real, good, and able; that Jesus is the Son of God – the descendant of David through whom God’s Kingdom has come on earth as it is in heaven; who has paid it all on the cross for our salvation and reconciliation with our Father; and that the Holy Spirit still speaks to our hearts and minds, we ought not to come prepared to read and analyze a book. That is the way of cultural Christianity.

We ought to come prepared to *listen* and to *learn to listen* fore the Word of the Lord.

We ought to come with the prayer: “Speak, Lord. For your servant listens.”

During the few weeks that remain of the season of Lent, I want to encourage you – and myself – to learn some part of the written Word of God; whether it be the gospels, the letters, the histories, the psalms, the proverbs, or some of the prophets.

The Bible can be a difficult book. It requires time, prayer, and struggle.

If the version of the Bible you have (and have always used) is cumbersome, if all your energy goes in trying to read the language instead of praying, absorbing, and internalizing, than try a different version. The right version of the written Word of God is the version you’ll pick up and listen for the Living Word of the Lord.

There are available to us in Canada an abundance of translations of the Bible! There are many places in the world without that luxury. Places where possessing a Bible may get you arrested or killed! But in Canada we have access to Bibles – written, audio book, Youtube videos.

The Word of the Lord is available in abundance!

Let it not be rare in our day. Let it shape how we react emotionally, let it shape our thoughts, our speech, and our actions. And let us learn to listen. To wait. To pray. And to obey.

For the health of our souls, the good of our societies, and the glory of God.
Amen.

Hymn #11 “The Lord’s my shepherd”

THE WORD MADE VISIBLE

Invitation

Presentation of Gifts (please leave your offering in the plate at back of church)

*“Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
Praise Him all creatures here below.
Praise Him above, ye heavenly hosts;
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.”*

Prayer of Dedication

Hymn #543 “Here, O my Lord, I see”

WE GO OUT TO SERVE

Benediction

“Go Now In Peace”

The Peace

One: The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all

All: **And also with you.**