“Speak LORD, Your Servant Is Listening”

I Samuel 3:1-10

Epiphany 2

“Can you hear me now?” Do you remember this commercial from a few years ago? That commercial probably would not resonate as well today. Cell phone coverage has become so good that there are fewer and fewer places where we CAN’T be heard. You can contact anyone from practically anywhere. No longer can the husband use the excuse that he didn’t know what kind of ice cream his wife wanted when he picked it out at the store. He could have called. And while the lifeline of many teenagers is the cell phone, it is also the leash parents use to remind them it’s time to come home. Cell phones have dramatically changed the way we communicate.

Since our cell phones are always with us, we have had to learn a new skill - “selective answering.” You see people doing this all the time. Their cell phone rings, they pull it out of their pocket, look at who is calling them and in a split second decide whether or not they are going to answer. It is “selective answering.”

Long before there were cell phones a boy named Samuel received a call from God. As we study this amazing story it will remind us never to use selective answering when God chooses to speak to us. Instead, like Samuel, we want to answer, “Speak LORD, Your Servant Is Listening.”

I. I Know It Is Dangerous To Ignore Your Word

Our text tells us, “In those days the word of the LORD was rare” (v. 1). A little historical backdrop will help us understand why this was the case. Travel with me back about three thousand years to the land of Canaan. The Israelites had conquered the Promised Land after coming up out of slavery in Egypt. But once the fighting was over, the people became spiritually lazy and forgot about all that God had done for them. They began to worship false gods and follow the sinful ways of the people around them. The very last words of the book of Judges describes the situation this way, “...everyone did as he saw fit” (21:25) – not as GOD saw fit, as THEY saw fit.

Still, even among all this rebellion and sin, there were God-fearing people. Samuel’s mother was one of them. After years of not being able to have children, God gave her a son. Out of thanks she gave her son to full-time service at the Tabernacle. Samuel became the assistant of a priest named Eli. This morning we meet Samuel, probably at the age of 12 or 13, lying down in his room in the Tabernacle, preparing to go to sleep for the night.

I want to leave Samuel lying there for a moment. We will join him again in a minute. But, before we do, think for a minute about the spiritual situation at the time. “The word of the LORD was rare.” It was rare because God’s people had generally ignored it. The LORD is a patient God. But when people ignore His Word long enough, there comes a point at
which He says, “I am taking it away. You have ignored me long enough! Now you will see what it is like to live without my Word in your life!”

We have seen it happen in many church bodies in our own country. We read about things like homosexual priests being ordained and pastors claiming that Jesus didn’t really rise from the dead and we wonder, “How can this kind of thing happen?” It happens because decades ago the leadership in those churches stopped listening to the Word of God. They said we couldn’t be sure what God really says in His Word. They said the Bible contained errors and we would have to decide for ourselves what is true and what is not. And when a people stops listening to God, it should not surprise anyone when things go horribly wrong.

By God's grace we still believe and confess that God's Word is GOD'S Word, without error and completely trustworthy. But let us not become so arrogant as to think that His Word could never leave us. There is the constant danger of taking His Word for granted, of not listening when God is speaking.

Imagine if God literally called you on your cell phone. You look at the caller ID and it says “The LORD.” Imagine putting your phone back in your pocket because you’re too busy, you have more important things to do. It’s unimaginable.

But, we don’t have to use our imagination to think of times when God has wanted to speak with us and we’ve been too busy to listen. We don’t have to imagine it. We can remember it. Home devotions and bible reading ignored. Worship opportunities wasted. Bible class that couldn’t be more convenient right after or before worship, but people miss it! God is speaking to us! Are we listening? Or, are we often more prone to say, “Speak LORD, if you would like. But I'm not listening.”

Be very careful, my friends, of taking God’s Word for granted. If He is ignored long enough, He will take His Word away. Listen to the warning God gave His people at the time of Amos the prophet, “The days are coming...when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it” (Amos 8:11,12). We don’t have to look any further than modern day Europe to find a fulfillment of this prophecy. Not long ago God’s Word flourished in that part of the world. I read that in one of those countries 93% of the population claim to be atheist.

Let us go to our God and confess every sin we have committed against His Word, every time we have despised it, every time we have ignored it, every time we have taken it for granted. And after we have confessed those sins, let us listen again to God’s Word because we will hear God speaking once again.

II. I Know It Is Comforting To Hear Your Word
This is what is so amazing! Even after our many sins against His Word, God in His mercy continues to speak to us – just as He did in Samuel’s day. God could have given up on His people. He could have abandoned them forever. But, He didn’t. He came to them through a man named Samuel.

We left Samuel, remember, lying down in his room in the Temple. Now, imagine this scene! You are 12, maybe 13 years old lying there in the middle of the night. It is nearly dark. Suddenly you hear your name, “SAMUEL!” Who could be calling? Well, there is only one person who could be calling you in the middle of the night – your master, Eli. You run to see what he needs. “I didn’t call you,” he says. “So, you go back to bed.” Again you hear, “SAMUEL!” You run to Eli. “I didn’t call you,” he says. “So, you go back to bed.” The same thing happens a third time. Finally, Eli tells you that it must be the LORD talking to you so go back and lie down.

What do you suppose that was like – walking back to bed and lying down? Talk about your heart pounding through your chest! Sure enough, once again God came to Samuel and Samuel responded beautifully, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

What a wonderful response! Isn’t this the way WE want to respond to God’s Word? “I’m LISTENING, LORD?” Because, of course, there is a difference between HEARING and LISTENING. The problem with many our relationships, whether it’s with our spouse or our co-workers or our children, is that we hear what they are saying but we don’t really listen. In one ear and out the other, right? “Didn’t you hear me ask you not to leave your dirty socks on the bathroom floor?” “Well...I...uuuh.” You heard it but you weren’t LISTENING.

It is much more serious when we don’t listen to God. When we fail to listen to God it leads to 1) sin and 2) suffering. Just take as an example our epistle lesson for this morning. In 1 Corinthians 6 God’s Word tells us, “Flee from sexual immorality.” What happens when we don’t listen? Sin happens. Fornication and adultery and pornography and incest and rape and lust. Not only does sin happen but suffering happens. Children are born without fathers and marriages are ruined and diseases are contracted. Sin and suffering ALWAYS get together eventually. That is why God so desperately wants us to LISTEN.

Parents, you know this feeling. When you see your child going down the wrong path you plead with him, “PLEASE! LISTEN to me! I know how this is going to end up!” And so God says to us, “Listen! I know what it best for you!”

But, we haven’t always listened. We have gone our own way and ignored God’s commands. That is why God sent Jesus. Jesus listened perfectly to His Father. Not only did Jesus hear God’s Word at every opportunity, He LISTENED to what God’s Word was saying. AND, He obeyed it. Not because it was always easy but because it was His Father’s will.

Sometimes we use conditional listening with God. Instead of saying, “Speak LORD, Your Servant Is Listening,” we say, “Go ahead and speak, LORD. I’ll think about what you have to say. Then, if I agree with it and I think it will make me happy, I’ll do it.”

But, not Jesus. Jesus was willing to listen to His Father’s will and DO His Father’s will even though it wasn’t easy, even though it meant suffering, even though it meant dying. Jesus did that in our place. He did it for you. And because Jesus listened to His Father, listen to what
God tells us in Ephesians 1:7, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.” Did you hear that? Did you LISTEN to that? You have the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus. He didn’t say, “You might” or “You could” or “Perhaps one day you will.” God said, “You HAVE the forgiveness of sins.” This is why it is so important to LISTEN when God speaks. Then we can say, “I may not feel forgiven, I may not deserve forgiveness, but God, YOU SAID my sins are forgiven. So, that MUST be the case.”

No wonder we want to listen when God speaks. We know His commands are always best for us and we know His promises are always true for us. We may not think certain cell phone calls are worth our time and attention. It’s easy enough to push a button and ignore it. But, may we never ignore God’s Word. May we, with Samuel say with joy, “Speak LORD, Your Servant Is Listening.” Amen.