

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

1 Samuel 3:1-20

^{3:1} Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. ² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³ the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. ⁴ Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵ and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶ The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸ The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰ Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." ¹¹ Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. ¹² On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³ For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. ¹⁴ Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." ¹⁵ Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶ But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." ¹⁷ Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." ¹⁸ So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him." ¹⁹ As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.

Commentary

This story is both fascinating and frightening, for it conjures up thoughts of God speaking to us in the middle of the night. What would we do? What would we say? It also contains a memorable response to God's call: "Speak, for your servant is listening." What better words for voicing one's commitment to faithful discipleship? While we tend to think of this story as Samuel's "call," it is more accurately a theophany (a report about God appearing in the world). The story identifies Samuel as the only source of God's word in a time of upheaval: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days." (3:1)

Reflection

How would we know if God were speaking to us? How can we discern the voice of God from among the clamor of voices demanding our attention?

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹ For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Commentary & Reflection

To read 2 Corinthians is to watch a pastor at work. Paul practices, describes, defends, and commends to his audience his pastoral ministry. Something quite rare presents itself in this letter: an extended argument for the ministry of the gospel offered by a practitioner in the heat of the moment.

Paul feverishly distinguishes his bold speech from arrogance. In 4:5 ("For we do not proclaim ourselves . . ."), he contrasts himself to the well-known figure of the harsh Cynic philosopher, who customarily preached his own moral virtue as the foundation of his bold speech. Rather than its lord, Paul portrays himself as the church's slave, a theme which he will develop in 4:10-12. Furthermore, according to 4:6, God (not Paul!) creates and illumines souls. Thus, Paul is

bold but not tyrannical. This will prove to be an important distinction in 5:11-6:13, when he exhorts the church to imitate his ministry of reconciliation.

Admirably ambiguous imagery in 4:7 underscores Paul's lack of arrogance and his love for the church: "we have this treasure in clay jars." What is the treasure? Is it the gospel and its ministry? Or is it Paul's own divinely illumined soul? Furthermore, what are clay jars? Are they the cheap and humble pots used for lowly and vulgar purposes? Or does Paul wish to evoke the body's natural fragility? All these meanings are present, though not simultaneously. On the one hand, a fragile container holds his soul so that the power might be God's and not his own, as his endurance of hardships in 4:8-9 illustrates. On the other hand, 4:10-12 emphasizes Paul's social abasement for the sake of the church. He voluntarily carries about the decaying body of Jesus to the Corinthians. Thus, even though he is bold with the church and speaks his mind, the rhetoric of 4:5-12 distinguishes Paul from harsh Cynic philosophers, whose freedom of speech cared little for the effects in the hearers and was simply proof of moral independence. If we keep in mind the church's need for reconciliation with certain members who were in conflict with Paul, the direction Paul is taking his self-presentation becomes intelligible. Just as Paul is free by the power of the Holy Spirit, yet enslaves himself to all for their salvation, so also should the church not stand on its rights, but forgive and comfort the one whom it had rebuked.

Mark 2:23-3:6

²³ One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵ And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶ He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." ²⁷ Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; ²⁸ so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

3 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." ⁴ Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Commentary & Reflection

When it comes to the Sabbath, an idea has gotten around that the Sabbath is greater than God. Let me explain. It is as though God is the guardian or protector of the Sabbath, making sure that

people keep the Sabbath holy, and finally awarding salvation only to those who are faithful Sabbathkeepers. In other words, in this kind of thinking, the main thing is the Sabbath; God is the enforcer of the Sabbath. God made the Sabbath, then made himself subject to it, then made people subject to it. Jesus cleared all such convoluted recipes off the dinner table. He made things plain: people were not made to be servants of the Sabbath; the Sabbath was made to be a servant of people. Furthermore, Jesus was not talking to or about all people. He was talking to first-century Jewish teachers of the law. And he was talking about Israel, the specific humans to whom God gave the Sabbath. For Christians to assume that the Sabbath commandment is for Christians is to misunderstand the covenant between God and Israel. And for Christians to hold out the Sabbath as a criterion of the truly faithful believers is to misunderstand the new covenant written on the hearts of all God's people, Jew and gentile alike.

In Mark 3:1-6, we have an account of Jesus healing a man with a withered hand in the synagogue. Several things are noteworthy in this record. First of all, we are told the motives of the Pharisees so that we can see into their hearts just as clearly as our Lord could as He stood before them. They were waiting for Him to act "in order that they might accuse him." The second thing I see is that when Jesus asked a question to get them to reveal their own convictions "...they kept silent." Does this not seem strange for men who seem to have such concrete opinions, as the Pharisees did, about how to serve God? It may seem a little less strange if we consider that this would be the exact method used by hypocrites whose "convictions" could be molded to suit the occasion. They would not want to commit themselves to any position until they saw what sort of situation it would put them into, no matter how right it might be. Again, I note that Jesus is "grieved," He is "angry," and it was their stubborn hearts that made him that way. Their hard hearts would not even allow them to say that healing this man's hand was a good thing. When our "positions" force us to not even be able to say a good thing is good, we had better be re-thinking the issue.

But lastly, there is a point of human nature here that needs to be identified. Can we notice on this occasion that those whose minds were already made up and whose hearts were stubbornly resistant were paying close attention to the Master. They were given the opportunity to take a part in this teaching session and commend the good work that Jesus was about to do. They could have been a positive voice and taken their side with the Lord. Instead, as the opportunity to do good and speak good things arose, they remained silent. They had made their choice to watch Jesus and accuse. Their voices were only going to be used for destructive purposes. And sure enough, verse 6 says that is exactly what they did. This is the mating of human nature and opportunity that is so often seen. When opportunities for honor and praise and encouragement and commendation come along, we are silent, while the accusers, and grumblers, and fault finders always await their opportunity to speak.

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

^{139:1} O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

² **You know when I sit down and when I rise up;**

- you discern my thoughts from far away.**
- ³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
- ⁴ **Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD,
you know it completely.**
- ⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
- ⁶ **Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.**
- ¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- ¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
- ¹⁵ **My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.**
- ¹⁶ Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
**In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.**
- ¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
- ¹⁸ **I try to count them -- they are more than the sand;
I come to the end -- I am still with you.**

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**