

So how are we doing? In many ways, good! Our church is blessed with lots of willing volunteers. If anyone says that people in this church don't like to be involved or don't like to volunteer, I would be the first one to disagree. We have hundreds of people serving at our church. But there is something that's really hard for us to do. Share God's Word face to face with another person—like God called Samuel to do with Eli. Here's an example: Our elders. We struggle mightily to find men willing to be elders—mature Christians willing to listen to God's Word and share it to those who need it most—those sick and suffering, or those lost and straying. It's not enough to listen to God's Word. Whether easy or hard, God calls us to speak his Word to others. Sometimes sharing the great news of Jesus. Sometimes warning about the dangers of sin. Our church is not functioning the way God wants if we are too timid or lazy to apply God's Word to our own lives and the lives of others.

Because Jesus cares so much for every single person. Jesus cares so much for you and me. He cares so much for our members who have fallen away. He cares so much for your children who are straying from him. He cares so much for those in our community who need a Savior. He cares so much for your spouse who right now isn't interested in Christianity. He cares so much for new immigrants who know nothing about Jesus. Jesus loves and cares so much about people that he doesn't just want us to listen to his Word. He wants us to live his Word. To know Christ and to make Christ known. This is what we're about. Whom is God calling you to serve? What is God calling you to do?

But maybe there's a little voice inside you that's saying, "But that's the pastors job!" Did you listen to our 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson? It's so important! *"It was Christ who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up"* (Ephesians 4:11-12). This is how God wants his church—his body—to work. What does God command pastors to do? To train God's people—you—for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up. We have three pastors and 721 members. Who can accomplish more? All of us together. Listening to the Word. Serving in our lives.

There was once a big conference of pastors and teachers to discuss what the Christian Church is all about. Long papers were read. Detailed presentations were made. Finally, one professor stood up and said, "I think it's simpler than all this. Know the Word. Know people. Know how to get the Word to the people." That's it, isn't it? We need it! They need it! Just this last week, I had a friend whose church member was murdered. Another friend whose city had an earthquake. Another friend whose husband died of a heart attack as he was opening the car door to go to work. Here at church I've gotten calls about mental illness. I've heard about sick kids... What do all these people have in common? They need Jesus. All around us. All around you, starting with the people in your pew. Why are we here? To bind up the broken-hearted and bring peace to the hopeless in Jesus our Savior. That is why God has put us and our church in the world. What can we say? Where can we start? Let God speak to you. Every day. In his Word. *"Speak, for your servant is listening."*

## 1 Samuel 3:1-10 Pastor Nathan Nass

State of the Church Sunday  
January 28, 2018

**The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions. <sup>2</sup>One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am." <sup>5</sup>And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down. <sup>6</sup>Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." <sup>7</sup>Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. <sup>8</sup>The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. <sup>9</sup>So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. <sup>10</sup>The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."**

**"Speak, for your servant is listening!"**

So what's the state of our church? How are we doing? To help us see where we're at, we're going to look today at a simple story from God's Word—one of my favorite stories in the Bible: The calling of Samuel. Do you know this story? It's important to know the background. Samuel's mother Hannah was a believer in God about 1100 B.C. who couldn't have a child. Year after year she went to worship God at the tabernacle—the Israelites' church—and prayed for a child. Finally, God gave her a son. After all that, Hannah gave this precious son a special name: Samuel. Samuel means "God listens." A perfect name!

Hannah was so thankful that she did something strange: She gave her son back to God. When Samuel was old enough, Hannah brought him back to the tabernacle and dedicated him to a life of service there. As much as she loved her son, Hannah loved God even more. This kind of love for God was unheard of in those days. In fact, our lesson tells us *"in those days the Word of the LORD was rare."* What a sad statement! But Hannah didn't care what anybody else was doing. Her son was going to serve the LORD! So Samuel, even as a little boy, lived and served God with Eli the priest at the tabernacle. He even slept there!

That's where our story starts. This boy Samuel was sleeping in the tabernacle, when he heard someone call his name, "Samuel!" Now how do you react when someone calls your name in the middle of the night? You wake with a start! So picture this young boy. He hears his name, "Samuel," and wakes up. "What? Here I am!" But there's nobody there. So he runs to Eli the priest. "Here I am. You called me." Many of you also know how Eli must have felt too! Suddenly a little person next to your bed in the middle of the night for no reason. "I didn't call you," he said. "Go back to bed." So Samuel did. But then it happened again. The voice, "Samuel!" Run to Eli. "Here I am!" "Go back to bed!"

Then it happened again—a third time! But instead of getting impatient, Eli started

to catch on. This must be God! At a time when the Word of God was rare, there still were true believers in God. There always are! Eli's heart must have started pounding. "It must be God!" So he told Samuel, "If he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" Once again Samuel went back and lay down. Do you think he fell back asleep? No way! Can you imagine the anticipation? "Is God himself calling me?" Wouldn't that be cool—and scary—all at the same time? He waited for the voice... It must have seemed like forever!

But then God spoke again. "The LORD came and stood there, calling as the other times, 'Samuel! Samuel!'" God stood by Samuel's side. Isn't that an amazing phrase? God "came and stood there"! He called Samuel again, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said exactly what Eli told him: "Speak, your servant is listening." Isn't this a great story!

Let's take it a step further: I told you what "Samuel" means. Remember? "God listens." Samuel's relationship with God started with God's grace in listening to and blessing his mother with a son. "God listens." But now whose turn was it to listen? Samuel's! When the Lord looks for someone to serve him, the first qualification is that the person be willing to listen when God speaks. Samuel went on to become one of the greatest prophets in the Bible. The secret of Samuel's success was that he knew how to listen. God doesn't need our great ideas. He's always looking for listeners. "Speak, for your servant is listening."

So how are we doing at listening? What's the state of our church? This is where it all starts—for a Christian and for a Christian church—hearing God's Word. How's that going? God is blessing us! 150 years of God's Word in our church. I know the anniversary was so last year, but what grace! And you are all here today—hearing God's Word. Thank you! But mixed with those blessings there's another reality. People are hearing God's Word less often than ever before at our church. Over the last five years—ever since I came—our church attendance has fallen by 15%. That's a lot! We have about the same number of members. We just attend church less often. I don't know why. Maybe we're preaching bad sermons. Maybe our services are boring. I wish I knew! Maybe we don't need God as much as we used to. Maybe we're too busy. Or maybe we're neglecting to listen to God's Word.

How excited do you think Samuel was when he went back to bed the third time and waited for God to call him again? Do you think his heart was pounding? "God's going to speak to me! I can't wait. This is awesome! What's he going to say? God himself is going to speak to me!" Know what? God still speaks. He speaks to us in his Word—as clearly and powerfully as he spoke to Samuel. How exciting is that! How can our hearts not race, "God wants to talk to me!" What if—when God called—Samuel had said, "Ahh, I'm too tired. I've got a big day tomorrow. There's too much going on right now. Maybe another day..." He'd be crazy! So how do we get so used to saying "No" to God? Too busy. Too tired. Too many activities. God understands, right?

No, God doesn't understand. He doesn't understand at all! I hear this idea a lot: "I can be a Christian without hearing God's Word. Don't worry about me, Pastor, I believe in God. I'm just not into that Bible stuff." God says, "No. That's impossible. Absolutely impossi-

ble." You cannot be a Christian without hearing God's Word, because "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). A Christian who doesn't hear God's Word is like a plant that doesn't get water. Over time, what happens? It dies! So how's your faith doing? How's our church doing? It's not good for less people to be hearing the Word!

Now put yourself into God's shoes. When you're talking, but nobody's listening, what do you do? You stop talking! Not God. He loves us too much! Whether we listen or fail to listen, God in love still speaks to us in his Word. He has so much to say that we need to hear! What topics do you think are going to come up in the real State of the Union address this week? Race? "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Yes! Sexual harassment? "Husbands—men—love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). If we could only love like Jesus...! Division? "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

Do we need that? I saw a post on Facebook that said, "I hardly go to church, but boy I feel good when I do!" "Duh." I mean, "Of course." God's still speaking. There is nothing more relevant for our world today than the Word of God. Hope? "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). Discouraged? Jesus says, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Feeling guilty? "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). God is still speaking. He's speaking to the sad and broken. He's speaking to you and me. Are we listening? Isn't that what we want to be known for? A church that says to God, over and over again, in our church and in our homes, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

It's just that God doesn't want us to stop there. We often treat this story as if Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening," and that was it. Was that the end of the story? Of course not! What happened next? God spoke! Do you know what God said to the boy Samuel? It's not what you'd expect. He told Samuel to pronounce God's judgment upon Eli the priest's family because Eli failed to discipline his sons. That part doesn't make it into children's Bible stories. Samuel wasn't just to listen. He had a job to do. Speak God's Word to Eli. That was going to be easy? No! But God always speaks to us for a purpose—to apply his Word to our lives and the lives of others. What is God calling you to do?

Strangely, Lutherans are not known for putting their faith into action. I'm not sure why! I heard a man describe Lutherans like us in this way: "Lutherans are the best fed and the least exercised of all Christians." Understand? It's not talking about food! Listen again. "Lutherans are the best fed and the least exercised of all Christians." In his perspective, we Lutherans get to hear about Jesus in ways that few other people do. We are well-fed with God's grace in Jesus. But what's the problem? No exercise. Do we take the Word that we're fed with and put it into action? There's a verse in the Bible that says, "Do not merely listen to the word.... Do what it says!" (James 1:22).