

I love this story in our first reading, about the Lord calling out to Samuel.

As background, Samuel's mother Hannah had been childless, and in her shame and grief, she prayed fervently to the Lord to grant her a son.

The Lord answered her prayers, she conceived, and named her son Samuel which means, "I asked the Lord for him"

And because God answered her prayers, she desired to give him over to the Lord for the rest of his life.

While still a young boy, his mother gave Samuel over to the care of the temple priest Eli. And that's where the story picks up in today's reading.

Three times, the Lord called out to Samuel while he was sleeping in the temple by the ark of God. And three times, Samuel thought it was the priest Eli calling for him.

In his wisdom, Eli realized that it was God who was calling out to Samuel. So, Eli instructs Samuel that the next time God calls to him, he should answer, "Speak, for your servant is listening".

This is a good story to prompt us to ask ourselves, how well do we listen for God's voice in our hearts?

I think it's true for many of us that we tend to do much of the talking when we pray, to make sure that God knows what we need.

We praise him, thank him, and plead with him.

But then, do we really stop and listen?

Or is our prayer only a one-way street?

How is God responding back to US?

What does HE have to say about our requests and desires?

St. Mother Teresa said, "We need to listen to God, because it's not what we say, but what he says to us, and through us, that matters."

And...how do we do that? How DO we listen to God?

Making time for quiet really helps.

We need to be quiet to really listen.

To hear and recognize God's voice requires us to put down what we are doing, cast our anxieties and troubles at God's feet, and give our whole attention to him. When we are recollected in silence before God, we begin to hear his voice.

There is a method of prayer that can be very helpful with this.

Begin by sharing with the Lord your feelings, thoughts, and desires, as you would with your spouse or trusted friend.

And then surrender to him those feelings, thoughts and desires and invite him to help you work through those. Invite him into the conversation.

And then STOP and LISTEN. Allow time to receive his responses of grace, assurance and direction.

God of course also speaks to us in Sacred Scripture. When we hear or read God's word, we open our hearts to hear his voice and his message for us; each of us, as individuals.

Let's examine a bit closer Samuel's response to the Lord. He says, "Speak, for your servant is listening". Your SERVANT is listening!

Yes, Samuel is listening, but he is also saying, "I am yours Lord, do with me as you wish". He is acknowledging that he is God's laborer.

Samuel is expressing his heart's desire to do God's will in his life.

If we are honestly desiring God's will, we will naturally want to listen to what the Lord desires for us.

But if we desire only our own will, we will want to block God's voice by ignoring him and allowing his voice to be drowned out by the noise of the world.

We certainly can't hear God if our life is full of noise and distractions.

I believe that there has been no other time in history when our culture has been more overwhelmed with distractions.

I have to confess that I have been struggling with distraction these past few weeks...

- with the busyness of the Christmas season,
- the continuing threat of COVID,
- should I get the vaccine?
- and then there's the civil war that seems to be unfolding in our country.
- Well, you get the picture!

We have all had the experience of distractions becoming a barrier to prayer and our relationship with the Lord.

As I was preparing this homily, the emails and text messages were pouring in, tempting me to look away from the task at hand.

Satan is constantly luring us to go here, go there, look at this, look at that. He does anything and everything to keep us away from our Lord. He wants us fearful and angry. He wants us divided and hateful.

We must respond to these temptations by combining regular, constant prayer with receiving the grace of the sacraments.

What great gifts we have in our Catholic church in the sacraments and our rich prayer traditions like the rosary.

We have our great Saints, who are waiting for us to simply ask for their help. God offers us so much grace, and so much mercy.

We don't need to look far for our Lord's love, healing and peace. It's right here in front of our eyes.

As Fr. Jeff said last weekend in his homily, things are going to get even worse as our world continues to turn away from God.

Now more than ever, it is critical for all of us to receive the grace and healing in the sacrament of reconciliation. It is difficult to listen to the Lord and hear his voice if we don't have a clean heart.

It is this sacrament, along with more prayer, that has been most help to me personally in overcoming those distractions and anxieties in MY life. It will for you too.

As Jesus walks by in today's Gospel, John the Baptist proclaims, "Behold, the Lamb of God". John knows that Jesus is the one who comes to take away the sins of the world. He forgives us and he gives us a new birth.

We are no different than Samuel. We too are given over to our Lord when we were baptized. We are his children, his beloved.

Like the future apostles in the Gospel who follow Jesus to see where he lives, let us also follow him, with all our being.

He is all we need.

Go to him. And listen to him.

Deacon Kevin Heckman

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 17, 2021