

The Danger of Sleeping in Church

1 Samuel 3:1-20

DON'T START WITH THE PASSAGE

Did you hear about Fred who kept falling asleep in church during the sermon? The pastor got tired of watching this Sunday after Sunday and decided to teach Fred a lesson.

As was his practice, he started to preach slowly, almost in a monotone – and sure enough, Fred soon fell into a deep sleep. The pastor then said to the congregation, "Everyone who wants to go to heaven, stand up." Everyone stood up ... except, of course, Fred who was fast asleep.

The pastor had everyone sit down. Then he gently said, "Everyone who wants to go to hell," and with a bang on the pulpit and a rise in his voice, "stand up!" Fred snorted awake and jumped to his feet as those around him snickered. Fred looked at all the people sitting around him, then looked at the pastor and said, "Preacher, I don't know what we're votin' on. But it looks like you and me are the only ones for it."

READ 1 SAMUEL 3:1-20 HERE

Now it's important to know the back story here. Years before this time in Samuel's life his mother, Hannah, had brought him to Shiloh to fulfill a promise she had made to God before Samuel was ever born. As a woman unable to have children, she promised God that if she were to be granted that privilege, she'd return the child to divine service.

She was as good as her word - Samuel was born, and as soon as he was able to make it on his own, she brought him to the high priest Eli. After all, she thought, Samuel was only hers for a while; he was on loan to her from the Lord. Now back to our lesson.

It was not the best of times for the people of Israel, but it wasn't the worst of times, either. There were no wars going on, no threats from hostile neighbors, although the Philistines were always looming on the horizon. The nation was not yet the unified whole it would become, it was more like a loose confederation of tribes.

Religiously, no new ground was being broken. In fact, it seems as if the faith that had sustained the people through centuries of slavery, the exodus from Egypt, a generation of wilderness wandering, and finally settlement in the promised homeland, was now reduced to the routine, and for some pious charlatans even an occasion for corruption.

"The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." That's how this morning's lesson began. Sounds unnervingly familiar, doesn't it?

Today we want to spend just a few moments dealing with the sacred power of a listening heart. Wonderful things happen sometimes when we're willing to listen.

The first thing to note is that **listening is not the same as hearing**. Hearing refers to the sounds that enter your ears. It is a physical process that happens automatically. Listening, however, requires more than that: it requires focus and concentrated effort.

Listening is a wonderful gift we can give to others. Listening is one of the greatest honors you can pay to someone. It's been said that "an open ear is the only believable sign of an open heart."

Listening is not the same as hearing. Listening requires intent. It requires focus. One common problem many people have is that instead of listening closely to what someone's saying, people often get distracted after a sentence or two, and instead start to think about what they're going to say in reply.

And when we're formulating our response, we're really not listening any longer to what the other person is saying. Did you hear what I said - or were you listening to what I said? Either way, hearing is not the same thing as listening.

Secondly, **listening to someone is how we say to another person, "you're important to me"**. You matter.

Chuck Swindoll experienced a time where there were too many commitments and not enough days to get things done. In his book *Stress Fractures* he shares about those days.

"I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day. Before long, things around our home started reflecting the pattern of my hurry-up style. It was becoming unbearable.

"I distinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our younger daughter, Colleen. She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, 'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin 'and I'll tell you really fast.'

"Realizing her frustration, and said honey, you can tell me--and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly." "I'll never forget her answer," he says. She said, "Then listen slowly!"

All she wanted was to know that her Daddy cared enough about her to take the time to really listen to her. Which is what many people around us hunger for, too. You see, when we listen to them - really listen - we're telling them they matter. You're important to me.

Last point: **The most important listening we can do is to listen to God**. It's interesting how much time Jesus spent in prayer. Obviously he believed listening to the voice of God was important.

It's God's deepest wish--to direct His children toward positive, fulfilling lives. But most never listen. And so we miss out on some of life's greatest joys.

Paul put it this way when he said, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Notice he didn't say that faith comes from talking, nor did he say that faith comes from doing. Faith comes from hearing and that only happens when we listen.

The old prophet Eli told young 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.

The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

What an eloquent, yet powerful prayer. Are you listening to the people around you--especially those closest to you? More importantly, are you listening to God? If so, a positive, fulfilling life awaits you. All you have to do is listen.

We are living in a time much like that of the boy, Samuel, a time when the "word of the Lord was rare." But the message of scripture is that God is not silent forever.

Maybe in the morning as you're preparing for the day ahead. Maybe at night when you're minding your own business trying to unwind. Maybe on Sunday morning when you're sitting quietly (even sleepily) in church. You hear a voice - you hear your named called, and like little Samuel, your world changes. Are you ready? Are you?