Text: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

**Introduction**

I want to talk this morning a bit about what might be the hardest thing in the world – hearing the Word of God. There are lots of things that we might be thinking when we say hearing the Word of God, so I want to start with a bit of what I’m not talking about. I’m not talking about taking the bible off the shelf and reading it. There are lots of people and lot of ways that we can read the bible and not hear the Word. I am also not talking about hearing a voice or anything in a category we might label supernatural. I’m not ruling such things out, but if it took that level of Supernatural to hear the Word of God I’d fear the number of ears to hear would be very small indeed. Also, the proof level of such things goes up significantly. As Paul would say about tongues, you better have an interpreter, otherwise be quiet in church. Whatever the experience, it is for you and not binding upon others. The Word of God on the other hand is something that is meant to be shared. It is “very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. (Deut. 30:14 ESV)” Likewise the Word of God is that which, “You shall teach diligently to your children, and shall talk of it when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. (Deut. 6:7 ESV).” Man lives by every Word that comes form the mouth of God. If we could not hear it, we would have no way out of our sins.

**Text**

Our Old Testament text tells us of exactly one of those times upon this earth where the hearing of the Word of God was rare. And it is worth marking some of the context. “The young man Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli.” The first thing we should notice is that even though the Word of the LORD was rare, something called ministering continued. This is a constant in the Old Testament and it is something that we ourselves might have perfected. I’m not sure there has ever been a time with more ministry taking place, being started, being funded. Lots and lots of ministry. Churches have all kinds of ministers these days. Yet the Word of the LORD was rare. Israel as they became rich could do round after round of sacrifices, and not mean any of it. Not hear what those sacrifices were saying to them. “This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men. (Isa. 29:13 ESV)” God said through both Isaiah and Ezekiel. Jesus would tell the pharisees, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; (Matt. 15:8 ESV).” It is very easy to replace hearing the Word of God with God shaped busyness.

The second part for the context concerns Eli. Now if you remember any of the story of Eli you should remember these parts. His sons were worthless. They had abused and continued to abuse their priestly vocations. They used them to prey upon the people of God. They turned the sacrifices into jokes. The profaned their callings and office at every turn. And Eli, what did Eli do? Nothing. Eli certainly didn’t cast them out which is what he should have done. But Eli didn’t even bother to correct them. He just didn’t care enough about hearing the Word of God. It was his calling, he was Ezekiel’s watchman, and he wouldn’t even warn his sons. And hence our text tells us a couple of things. “There was no frequent vision,” and “Eli’s eyesight had begun to grow dim.”

I think the text mixes its metaphors here a bit sliding between hearing the seeing, but stick with me. For the Word of God, the Bible prefers the hearing idea. In order to see, you have to hear first. Faith comes by hearing. And when you hear the Word, it is amazing what you might then see. Elisha had heard the Word of God from Elijah, a time when the Word of God was full in the land. And as Elijah is taken up, Elisha sees “the chariots and horsemen of Israel.” And then he picks up the mantel of Elijah and goes back to work. Part of that work one day was calming one of his servants who woke to find the chariots and horsemen of Syria surrounding the city. And Elisha tells him, “do not worry, we are more than they.” And then he prays that the servant’s eyes would be opened. And then he saw “the chariots and horsemen of Israel” surrounding the army. You can find the amusing sight-based ending to the Word in 2 Kings 6, but it is based upon first hearing the Word. “Don’t be afraid, God has this.”

But Eli, Eli lacked vision and his eyes grew dim. When you can’t hear the Word, you can’t see it’s effects. When you ignore, reject or abuse the Word – its effects disappear from your sight. Why do we seem so short on grace for each other? We’ve stopped hearing the Word of God’s grace for us. Why is it hard for us to see our way out, or put together a compelling vision? Because we don’t hear the Word of God. We hear the babel of men, which often is our own babel. We confuses our own words for the Word of God. We give approval for those things we know are contrary. We have become Eli’s.

**Christology**

But here is the grace of the text. Here in the season of Epiphany I’d liken it to the gospel of John’s prolog that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. “The lamp of God has not yet gone out.” And with Jesus that is a lamp that never goes out. We have that lamp over there – the eternal candle. If you grew up Roman Catholic you probably know what it’s original purpose was. It was lit when there were consecrated hosts present. When Christ was present, the light was. The Lutheran Reformation kept everything they could but were attempting to hear the Word of God. And in this case the presence of Christ is less about being confined to the host – although He promises to be there – but where 2 or 3 are gathered he is there. Where you draw near to hear God draws near to speak. The light shines and the darkness has nor overcome. Even with Eli, “the lamp of God had not yet gone out.”

With Samuel we have a bit of that Supernatural Word, there is a voice calling. But God is just doing something that Eli should have been doing. God is just giving Eli a gentle prod.

Samuel has ears to hear. He hears someone call his name and he reports for duty. “Here I am!” Of course he has reported to Eli. And Eli grumpily responds, “I did not call, go back to sleep.” From the point of Eli, when we hear the Word of God how often do we do just this. Ignore it and go back to sleep. This word annoys me. But it is also worth considering Samuel. How often might we be presented with someone who does hear and is eager. And our first words are stop being silly.

So it happens a second time. “Samuel!” And Samuel does the same thing and Eli does the same thing. This time the text reminds us of something, “Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD has not yet been revealed to him.” We are not born into this world knowing the LORD. We can certainly look out the window and should be able to say, “that didn’t just come from nowhere.” But knowing nature’s god isn’t knowing the LORD. Knowing the LORD comes through that Word. And that Word requires someone to reveal it to us. That was Eli’s job. A job he had failed to do with his two sons. A job he had failed to do twice with Samuel.

But the LORD gives Eli a third chance. Because “the Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the young man.” And he gives him the best instruction he can. “Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.”

**Moral**

Eli was pretty worthless most of the time, but God works through the humblest of things. And Eli’s advice on hearing the Word is important.

“Your servant.” If you are going to hear the Word of God you can never approach it as the master. That is how we so often approach the bible or preaching. We are the judge of it. We take this bit, we reject this bit. We strain out whole parts because they don’t hit our ears in pleasant way. And that is the path to hearing less and less of the Word. Placing ourselves over the text, demanding it work on our schedules, that he Word of God conform to our notions. Eli’s greatest bit of teaching to hear the Word is “Speak, you servant hears.” If we are not willing to be the servant of the Word, we will not hear it.

The second bit of Eli’s advice that is meaningful is his note of preparation and expectation. We don’t know when the Word of God might come to us, but we can be prepared, and there are more likely places. Eli tells Samuel to go back and lie down. Go back to doing what you would be doing anyway. Hearing the Word of God does not require us to drop our nets and follow. It may ask us to do that at some point. It may not. But the initial hearing is while we are going about our day. But Eli also says “if he calls you, be ready to say, Speak.” We should come to worship expecting the Word of God to speak to us. We should read our bibles expecting the Word. We should build into our lives normal times of prayer or worship and study or meditation. We should expect to hear the Word. And when it comes say “Speak, Lord.”

**Eschatological**

To see, we have to hear first. And maybe the LORD will come knocking with a supernatural voice three times. I expect that when we are in the age to come and are no longer seeing through a glass darkly it will be amusing at how many such voices we missed in this life. Which mean if we hear it today, we should “watch” or “prepare” as Jesus would often say. We should not “despise His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it.” And the biggest part might be expecting to hear it.

Because when we are prepared and open to hear pay attention to the last detail of Samuel’s story. “The LORD came and stood.” Christ promises us his presence. That presence was long ago, when he walked this earth. That presence is right now. In the Word preached and in the Sacraments. That presence is whenever you pray – as you lie down and as you stand up. Christ comes into our midst, stands with us. Just as I firmly believe that on my death bed, there he will come and stand. And I hope I will have learned by then to say, “Speak LORD, for you servant listens.”