

This past week my family came back from Mexico, and the house was back to 'normal.' No more soothing sound effects of rippling water from a fountain or a brook; no more gentle violin music filling the air while the brushing sound of turning pages from my favorite book could be heard. Oh no. We were back to the squeals and bickering of chattering children, with the pitter-patter [-pounding] of little feet sprinting through the house; the television droning on in the background while the stove is cooking with sizzling sounds and the clatter of a boiling pot. And of course, I once again hear the seemingly constant mantra of insistent, little voices repeating over and over again: "*Daddy...Daddy...Daddy.*" "Yes, what is it?" "*Uhh, I forgot.*"

I suppose that can get to a parent after a while, but when you think about why they do that, you realize they just want *your* attention. Children aren't the only ones who seek attention, are they? We call out for each others' attention when we make phone calls, send text messages, or use other interpersonal websites. Think about how often you do those things on any given day, and you realize how much we seek each other's attention! Even people we don't want to talk to seek our attention, like that '1-800' telemarketer. You decide, 'Not right now.' But if it's someone who really knows you and cares about you, you respond differently when they call, like with a friend or family member.

Teens, if you have a cell phone that you use to call or send text messages, I think it's safe to assume that your parents have paid for part, if not all, of that service. If that's the case, where parents are footing the bill for your cell phone, wouldn't it be fair to expect that you respond when you see your parents' caller ID on the phone? Shouldn't parents expect you to answer when they call?

How about when God calls? It's like we've got this family plan. He paid for it, so it doesn't cost us a dime. You get unlimited calling, long distance, no peak hours or roaming – it's the best communication system going with the most powerful, loving, all-knowing God on the other end. He calls himself your Father, your Brother, and your personal Counselor. Whenever you need to talk to him, whenever you call out to him in prayer, he promises to 'pick up' and listen anytime. He even tells us to call out to him in the day of trouble; he will deliver you, and you...will honor him. But how?

Let's listen to what God tells us in our first lesson for today, where he describes the state of affairs in Israel about a thousand years before Jesus was born. It was shortly before the reign of King David, and actually Israel had no king at this time. It was known as the period of the judges, when everyone did as he saw fit. During this time there was a repeating cycle, where **"the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals...In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them...Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders,"** (Judges 2:11,14,16).

When God raised up these judges in Israel, could you hear what he was saying to his people? "*I still love you and forgive you, which is why I am saving you...again!*" The Lord was calling out to his people through the mighty acts of the people known as judges. Our text, however, shows that definite resistance to God's word that existed at the time the boy Samuel was serving the Lord in the temple. **"*In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.*"** God wasn't speaking to his people the way he used to speak to them through Moses or other leaders in Israel. He wasn't appearing through visions or special revelations like before. The problem, though, wasn't God. It was the leaders of Israel, including the high priest Eli and his sons, Hophni and Phineas. The Lord called to them, and you know how they answered? They stole meat from the sacrifices that were offered at the temple; they seduced women who came to worship. They could have offered animal sacrifices to point people ahead to the Lamb of God that would take away the sins of the world. But they wanted to get rich and live a wild life instead of doing what God called them to do. The word of the Lord was rare in those days.

God called to his people during the time of the Reformation, too, leading faithful scholars to translate the Bible into languages that people could read and understand. Prior to that the church deliberately kept the Scriptures away from the people and made traditions in the church more important than the Word of God. You could say that in those days, the word of the Lord was rare, also.

How about today? Is the word of the Lord rare in our day and age? Well, for a few dollars we can order Bibles from large publishers and practically give them away to people. If people prefer to listen to tapes, CD's, mp3's or podcasts, it's literally at their fingertips. Even some of our cell phones have quick and easy access to various translations of the Bible in different languages. Internet, radio and TV broadcasts deliver sermons and Bible studies for those willing and able to listen. The word of the Lord is *not* rare in our land. But do we hear him calling?

Sure we do, but sometimes we're just so busy and can't take time for his call to sit for a few moments to read or listen to his Word. That's how God calls to us – through his Word! We wouldn't say it this way, but it's like we're telling God,

"Look, don't call us, but we'll call you when we need it." But God calls anyway, through his Word and sacrament. Do you hear him? It's difficult, because so many other voices are competing for our attention through various forms of media. How many channels do you have coming into your home, with so many philosophies and ideas of what real life is all about? You've seen people who insist that you can have God on your own terms. "*Just listen to your heart and that inner voice, because God speaks to you from within...*" Baloney! God has told us that the only way you can hear his voice is through listening to what he says on the pages of Scripture.

We recognize this danger, that the word of Lord could become rare through disuse or refusal to pick up when he calls through his word. But God finds a way to break through the confusion and disconnect, just like he did when he made his voice known through a young boy named Samuel. Samuel was serving in the temple of the Lord, just as his mother, Hannah, had promised when he was just a baby. At night time, Samuel hears a voice calling to him, "*Samuel!*" Immediately he runs to Eli thinking the elderly man who was losing his eyesight needed help. Eli tells him, "*I didn't call you. Go back to bed.*" Samuel listens and goes back to lie down, but just as he's drifting off to sleep, he hears the voice again. "*Samuel!*" He runs to Eli to make sure he's okay. Finally Eli realizes that it was the Lord calling out to Samuel. So he tells him, "Go back to bed, and if the Lord calls again, then say, "***Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.***" Sure enough, the Lord called again, and the boy Samuel responded in faith.

To this point in time, "⁷...***Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.***" The Hebrew word for 'know' is also used for the intimate relationship between husband and wife. The word for 'reveal' is used in the Old Testament for removing clothing. The mighty God, the Creator of the universe, made himself known in a very special way to Samuel. He revealed himself and gave him special messages to share with his people, so that they, too, could respond to God's call.

God reveals himself to us, so that we can respond to him, too. In nature, God shows his power, his wisdom and his love. He has also chosen to reveal himself in a deeper, clearer fashion by speaking to us through the prophets and apostles. The Holy Spirit carried them along and guided their words to be recorded on the pages of holy Scripture. Do you hear God's voice calling to you in his Word to believe it and to base your whole life on it?

Sometimes, though, we hear God calling to us in his Word. We know what he wants us to do. That's not the problem. The problem is that it isn't always convenient or compatible with what we want. How quickly we can cover our ears and hearts when he tells us what he has sacrificed for us, because, "Look, Lord, at how much *I* have sacrificed and given up for you!" You try so hard to do what he wants, but do you ever get the feeling that it's just too hard, that you just don't have the strength to get up and respond the way God calls you to?

Besides, we've known people who ignored God's word and followed their own hearts, they're not doing too bad. So maybe if we follow our own heart this once, it won't be the end of the world. He'll still love us, because he's our Father, and we are his children – his self-indulgent, selectively hearing, defiant children. Too often we have chosen to justify our offenses against God and each other, rather than confessing them as the damnable sins they are. We have listened to God's word with a half-hearted interest and then arrogantly assumed that '*this doesn't really apply to me anyway.*' From one side of our mouths we have said that "***All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking correcting and training in righteousness...***" (2 Ti 3:16) But then we have wanted to downplay or minimize God's word, to sort of turn down the volume when God speaks, so that we don't offend others with God's word.

But even when we are unfaithful to our God, he continues to call out to us and speak to us through his Word. He tells you how he created the foundations of the world and how he has always preserved it by his mighty power? Do you hear the love in his voice, explaining to you how he chose you in eternity because of Christ and how he has always planned for your salvation? Right after our first parents sinned in the Garden of Eden, God promised that he would send one of their own descendants to crush the head of the devil and save his people from their sins. He calls out in his Word, "***It is finished!***" so that you know that every last filthy thought, word and deed of yours (and of this entire world of sinners) has been paid for by the perfect life and innocent death of God's own Son. "***Because I live, you also will live.***"

Not only has he called out to you, but he has changed your heart. You were baptized, you were washed, and you were clothed with Jesus' blood and righteousness through faith. By his Holy Spirit, God made you his own child through the gospel, that Word of God's love that crushes the power of sin, death and the devil. God has freed you from these enemies, so that when he calls, you can respond, "***Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.***"

When you call upon the Lord, pray for a willing, obedient heart that listens to his gospel and to his whole word. Open your Bible often to hear his voice. Rest in his forgiveness and peace, so that you can respond without hesitation or fear. Submit your will and your lives to the One who has always loved you, and trust in his good and gracious will. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, that one thing needful, so that "¹⁷...***whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.***" (Col 3). Amen.