

Pastor's Message
1 Samuel 3:1-10
John 1:43-51

To talk about implants, especially in Church, is to risk being risqué. But you know what I'm talking about. Thirty million women in this country alone who want to look good for others or feel better about themselves have them -- silicone enhancements, augmentations, enlargements.

Not all implants, however, are cosmetic. Today, biomedical technology can provide retinal implants, artificial corneas, vocal implants, not to speak of entire organ implants -- not transplants, but artificial implants -- the heart, for example.

A member of one of my previous Churches had one - one of the most successful implants - cochlear implant -- a device which, when implanted inside the human skull, connected with tiny wires to the cochlear canal in the inner ear, then fastened to an externally placed microphone, allows a sort of hearing for the hearing-impaired.

The cochlear implant gives the deaf ears to hear, but with it, can they listen? That's the question asked about the controversial implant, especially when used on children and profoundly deaf adults.

In today's text, hearing isn't Samuel's problem -- listening is. He can hear, but he can't listen. He can sense, but he can't perceive. "The Word of the Lord was rare in those days," it says in 1 Samuel 3:1; "visions were not widespread."

That's what happens, right? We get busy with our lives. We get caught up in the daily grind of just living, taking care of business, paying the bills, keeping up the house, raising our children, watching time fly by. When this happens, we sometimes stop paying as much attention to hearing the Word of the Lord. We skip going to church to worship and pray. We quit studying the Scriptures. We stop paying attention to our spiritual lives, and the Word of the Lord becomes rare to us. Visions are not widespread.

Just like the Israelites, we get busy with our lives, busy with other things, and so we may find it more difficult to carve out time for the LORD, for going to worship, and giving thanks for all that the LORD has given us. Then something happens that makes us more aware of our need for God's help, and we make the time to go. That's just the way we are.

When the Word of the LORD has become rare and visions are not widespread, we may forget what the voice of the LORD even sounds like. We have trouble recognizing it!

Maybe the problem isn't that the Word of the LORD is rare and visions are not widespread. Maybe the problem is that people are having trouble hearing the Word and seeing the vision because they don't know how to recognize it.

One day, as I was walking back home, I had a vision of God's presence. The snow was brilliant white when suddenly I saw a flash of red – not a male cardinal, but a red-headed woodpecker on a birch tree. "What a big bird," I marveled as I stopped to watch it for a while. Surely, there before my eyes, was a vision of God's creative glory.

The Word of the LORD is not rare in our day. God is present and visions are all around us. What is lacking is not the LORD's Word and Vision in this world; what is lacking is our ability to hear and see it.

There are times when, because of just plain busyness, we fail to see or hear or perceive the presence of God and fail to notice a word from the LORD. Sometimes it can be because of people's attitudes when they reject the possibility of a word from the LORD. Sometimes it is out of fear of what that word might expect or demand from us. Sometimes we fail to hear or see or perceive out of selfishness or self-centeredness. And sometimes, it's because of a lack of faith or an unwillingness to hear or a lack of commitment to hope in the LORD.

People of faith acknowledge the Word of the LORD all around us. Visions are everywhere, all the time. It isn't the Lord who becomes absent. It is the people of the LORD who forget how to hear and see. There are times when we all need to be awakened in the night by a clear voice or a clear vision, and we need to have not just the courage, but the commitment, to respond with "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening!"

Both of our Bible readings today are about a call from the LORD. The call of Samuel in today's reading has nothing to do with pastoral ministry or congregations. The call of Nathaniel in our reading from John's gospel is simply to follow Jesus as a disciple. Both of the calls we hear about today are unexpected and unsettling. Our calls can be the same.

So, what should disciples expect? Why would we answer this call?

Disciples should expect lots of ordinary life, to be sure. To follow a person as a disciple means you are with that person most of the time. And most of the time, most people, including Jesus, are doing fairly ordinary things, like walking, or driving, or eating, or sleeping.

But Jesus offers something far out of the ordinary when he invites disciples. "I tell you the truth," Jesus says, "you will all see heaven open and the angels of God going ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man echoes the story of Jacob encountering God in a dream (Genesis 28:12). In the dream, the angels ascended and descended upon a ladder—the pathway from earth to heaven and heaven to earth. Here, Jesus indicates he himself is that pathway, and his disciples will come to know this.

“Heaven opened“ meant that the existing world order was being broken into and invaded by God. Discipleship to Jesus involves becoming able to see God breaking into this world and God’s kingdom encountering and upending its powers in real time. It means we get to see what others so easily miss—that this world, as it is, is deeply broken in ways that only God can (and will and does!) restore. It also means we get to be witnesses and collaborators with the inbreaking kingdom of God.

Do we expect to see the skies split and angels all around? That is exactly what Jesus tells these first followers to expect and what many Christians through the ages have come also to expect. Do you expect this? How are you inviting others to expect this?

How do we get to the point where we expect to see God breaking into our world? How do we get to the point where we see that the Word of the Lord is not rare in our day? We do just what Eli and Samuel did. We trust in the LORD. We do our daily devotions. We practice the disciplines that our founder, John Wesley, advocated for Methodists, disciplines that open us up to being able to recognize the LORD’s voice.

We get up and go to worship even when we don’t feel like it, even when we don’t like who is preaching, and even when something else looks more appealing.

We make sacrifices to the LORD. We give back a portion of what we have been given—our first fruits—in offering to God.

We study the Word so we’ll be able to recognize the LORD’s voice when we hear it.

We pray, not just when we are desperate, but every single day. We offer prayers when we rise in the morning and when we lie down at night. We give thanks and praise continually for all of God’s blessings in our lives.

The word from the LORD calls each of us to share what we have seen and heard with others. It charges each of us to point the way to the LORD for those who have ears to hear, but don’t know how to listen or what they are hearing. The word from the LORD expects each of us to tell our experience of how and where we have heard that Word.

At some point, every disciple has to answer the question, “Who is Jesus?” At some point, every disciple has to answer the question, “What does it mean to call yourself a follower or disciple?” Today’s passage from

John invites us to consider our own response to Jesus' invitation to "Follow me" and to reflect upon why we know him as our Lord and Savior.

Something more must have happened that day. What do you think it was about Jesus that caused Nathanael to want to "come and see" for himself who this man was and what he was saying?

What was it about Jesus that prompted you to want to "come and see" who he was? What happened that caused you to be curious and want to learn more? Where were you and what were you doing when you sensed Jesus picking you out of the crowd or spotting you under the fig tree? What enabled you to not just hear, but to respond to his invitation to follow him? What made you decide to answer his call on your life in the way that you did?

The most wonderful thing about Bible passages like ours today is they give us the opportunity to share the story of our own call to follow Jesus. Every person's story is different, and each one needs to be told! It is not just pastors or missionaries who have stories to tell; every person who claims to be a Christian – a disciple and a follower of Jesus – has a story to tell. People are looking for something or someone to believe in and to commit their lives to. For believers, the word of the LORD is **not** rare and visions **are** widespread.

Richard Cardinal Cushing, once Bishop of the Boston Archdiocese, said that:

"If all the sleeping folks will wake up,
and all the lukewarm folks will fire up,
and all the dishonest folks will confess up,
and all the disgruntled folks will sweeten up,
and all the discouraged folks will cheer up,
and all the depressed folks will look up,
and all the estranged folks will make up,
and all the gossipers will shut up,
and all the dry bones will shake up,
and all the true soldiers will stand up,
and all the church members will pray up
- and the Savior for all is lifted up -
then...

You can have the world's greatest renewal."

Proclaiming the word of the LORD among us and showing the vision of the LORD can change the world. Let it be so. Amen.