

“I’m Listening!”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron
January 17, 2021 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Hymns for Worship Video – January 17, 2021

“Open my Eyes, that I May See” #500 in the Book of Praise

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Open my eyes that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free

Chorus

Silently now I wait for Thee
Ready my God Thy will to see
Open my eyes illumine me
Spirit divine

Open my ears that I may hear
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear
And while the wave notes fall on my ear
Everything false will disappear

Chorus

Open my mouth and let me bear
Gladly the warm truth everywhere
Open my heart and let me prepare
Love with Thy children thus to share

Chorus

“Be thou my vision” #461 in the Book of Praise

(Words adapted for consistency with the Book of Praise)

Eleanor Henrietta Hull | Mary Elizabeth Byrne

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Be Thou my vision
O Lord of my heart
Naught be all else to me
Save that Thou art
Thou my best thought
In the day or the night
Waking or sleeping
Thy presence my light

Be Thou my wisdom
Be Thou my true Word
I ever with Thee
And Thou with me Lord
Thou my great Father
Thine own may I be
Thou in me dwelling
And I with Thee one

Be Thou my breastplate
My sword for the fight
Be Thou my armour
And be Thou my might
Thou my soul's shelter
And Thou my high tow'r
Raise Thou me heav'nward
O pow'r of my pow'r

High King of heaven
When the battle is done
Grant heaven's joys to me
O bright heaven's Sun
Heart of my own heart
Whatever befall
Still be my vision
O Ruler of all

"It is the cry of my heart"

Terry Butler

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Chorus

It is the cry of my heart
To follow You
It is the cry of my heart
To be close to You
It is the cry of my heart
To follow
All of the days of my life

Teach me Your holy ways oh Lord
So I can walk in Your truth
Teach me Your holy ways oh Lord
And make me wholly devoted to You

Chorus

Open my eyes so I can see
The wonderful things that You do
Open my heart up more and more
And make it wholly devoted to You

Chorus

Repeat last line of Chorus 3 times

Closing Chorus: "Walk with the Lord"

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Walk with the Lord

Go from this place

filled with his everlasting grace

Walk with the Lord

Go where he leads

blessed by his love and his peace

Each day you live in all you do

let the light of Christ be found in you

Walk with the Lord

Trust and obey

Go now and serve him in faith

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Scripture Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³ the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. ⁴ Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵ and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶ The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸ The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰ Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

John 1:43-51

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Meditation

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Most people are aware that our family members are big fans of Marvel's Avengers. Part of our enjoyment comes from well-cast movies and characters that have taken hold of our hearts. The stories are well-written and the actors appear to be having fun while they make these movies. Of course, like so many franchises, there is a good number of movies to choose from. Individual characters have their own films, some have several, and then there are the movies about the whole group, or at least part of it. From the first Iron Man to End Game, we have watched this cast of characters develop and grow, and even become a little bit more human throughout the years – even the Hulk.

A big part of why I am a fan is the humour in these movies. Some of the lines thrown out are great, and to be honest, especially in our current state of living under pandemic restrictions, we all need a little more laughter. In the first of the actual Avengers' movies – the one that starts bringing the group together for their adventures in saving the world from evil – there is a moment I can watch over and over again. It's a scene in which Thor, the Asgardian god of thunder, and his younger brother Loki, the prince of mischief (and, incidentally, the bad guy in that movie), are having a heated discussion about Loki's antics and his path of destruction in the world Thor has sworn to protect – Earth. They are standing on a mountain side, having an intense argument. Thor tells Loki to put aside his delusions of grandeur and go home with him. Thor begins to lose his patience with his younger brother, and finally steps back and says, "now listen well, brother..." The second he utters that phrase, Iron Man swoops in unexpectedly and grabs Thor off the mountain. Loki, still standing on the mountain, doesn't shift his gaze, inclines his head toward where Thor stood seconds ago, and says, "I'm listening." It loses something in translation from screen to sermon, but it really is quite funny. It's unexpected and sets a tone that makes you want to listen for what happens next. It's a moment that surprises the audience, and makes us want more.

Today we have shared a story from the Old Testament that portrays an unexpected moment that makes the characters in the story and the audience want to listen for what happens next. It makes us pay attention as we wait for the line, "I'm listening."

The story of Samuel's call is one some of us learned in Sunday School. As a child, I remember being amazed that a child like me could hear from God like Samuel did. I was young, but so was Samuel. Did that mean one day God would speak to me too? I wondered what God's voice would sound like. Would it be scary? Would it be friendly? Would I be in trouble for something? I remember it feeling strange to even think about it. God would never talk to me. I had nothing to worry about.

Ha. I'll leave that for another time.

What I didn't realize was significant when I was a child was the first line of the story: *The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.* God speaking to Samuel was not only amazing, but rare! Israel hadn't been witnessing God's direct leadership for a while. God hadn't been speaking. Why? Because Israel's leadership, namely Eli himself,

hadn't been leading. In fact, Eli was a rather ineffective leader. He let his sons get away with atrocities against God's people. He spent most of his time sitting on a throne looking important. The biblical story never mentions God having spoken to Eli, but it does say Eli has grown somewhat numb to noticing anyway. So, God takes things in a new direction. Eli is stripped of his authority through Samuel, the boy to whom God does speak. One commentator has written, "Samuel's first act as a rising prophet would be to prophesy judgment to Eli, who sat on a throne but did not prevent abuse of God's people or perversion of ritual worship. Much as his mother's song in 1 Samuel 2 set the scene for the overturning of rulers and raising up of the lowly, the first words of God that Samuel received (1 Samuel 3:11-14) set the tone of prophetic judgement on callous, abusive, unfaithful rulers in the rest of the books of Samuel and Kings."¹

Samuel would be the prophet that would bring a word of judgment to Eli the priest, and his out-of-control family. But first, the boy had to recognize who was speaking to him. He had to recognize it was the Lord, the God of Israel. Ironically, it was the old priest that had not heard directly from God that recognized who was speaking to Samuel, and gave the boy the appropriate response. The next time God spoke, Samuel responded: "I'm listening." Eli had to have known the prophetic word that would be given to Samuel would not be good news for the priest and his family, but he evidently recognized there was nothing he could do to stop it. He may as well tell the boy how to respond. He and his sons had abused their positions of power and authority, and they were going to reap the consequences. They would lose those positions. And the boy who had been under his supervision in the Temple would rise to be given power. His power, however, would be displayed and expressed very differently. It would be an authority. The Temple would no longer be the hub for prophecy, but Samuel would travel around, laying the path for others who would come after him to go to those who needed to hear the Lord's message. He sought out kings and leaders to give them the word of the Lord. He didn't wait for them to come to him. Samuel would begin to set things right for the people. The same commentator wrote: "God's passionate disgust at abusive leadership and raising up young prophets to undo the abuses of their elders who ignored God and failed to protect innocent people will be a theme that returns through much of the rest of Scripture."²

I don't envy Samuel. He doesn't have big shoes to fill, he has a big mess to clean up.

The Gospel reading today is also about listening to God's voice, but this time it comes to those who hear it rather differently from that of Samuel's experience. This time, they not only hear the divine voice, they see the One who speaks. They see Jesus. They may not recognize him right away, but they see him and they hear him.

They listen.

They respond.

And even though Nathaniel needs a little extra convincing, he listens to what is being said, and more importantly, to the One who speaks.

¹ Workingpreacher.org. Resources for January 17, 2021. Cory Driver, Director of Transformation Leadership Academy, Indianapolis IN.

² Ibid.

Nathaniel is sceptical about what Philip says to him. He wonders why he should waste his time on anything from Nazareth, but Philip presses on – “Come and see.” Now, that isn't a particularly exciting statement. And yet, it works. Nathaniel listens. He listens to someone he obviously respects, even trusts, and he does what his friend asks. Whatever Nathaniel heard in Philip's words, he knew the words themselves weren't the important part. It was what they were prompting him to do that was important. Was there something in the way Philip said them? Was there a glimmer in his eyes? Could Nathaniel hear the excitement as Philip spoke? Whatever it was, he listened and he responded. And he met Jesus.

Upon meeting Jesus, Nathaniel is amazed about what Jesus knows about him, even though this is the first time they've ever connected. “How do you know so much about me?” Philip's question comes with a tone of wonder. How could this Jesus know him so well when they've never met? Again, Nathaniel listens to the response, and in listening, he believes.

Our friend at St. Columba, the Rev. David Berkers sent out some thoughts in his daily Words of Comfort in the past week that made me think about Nathaniel and his first experience of Jesus, and how quickly he believed he was the One promised through the prophets. Dave began with Psalm 139:1-2... *You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.*

He then went on to write about how conversation has changed during the pandemic because we can't talk face-to-face. We may see each other, but only partially because we are wearing masks. He wrote, “It is amazing how much that changes our conversation. I am by nature an introvert... As a minister I have to push myself at times so that I am reaching out and not pulling back. I find that while I may not be talking, I am listening and thinking... Our passage from Psalm 139 tells us that God knows us, knows every thought from afar. God ‘knows’ us, the real us and loves us in spite of ourselves... I am thankful that God knows the ‘me’ behind the mask...”³

Those words struck a chord with me as I thought about Nathaniel, and Philip, Andrew and Peter; about me, my family, my congregation, my colleagues. I thought about how well God knows us, even when we have pulled back or haven't connected with God in a while.

The things I don't want to admit about myself, God knows.

The things I don't recognize in myself, God knows.

The strengths I may be afraid to act on, God knows.

The things left unspoken in prayer, God knows.

God knows these things about all of us, and knows them better than we do.

God has known us from before our birth and will know us long after our earthly death.

And God listens to the words of our hearts, whether we speak them openly or not.

Samuel had a rare experience in hearing God's voice, and finally was given the correct response. “I'm listening.” What he heard took his life in a whole new, and not easy, direction.

Nathaniel had an amazing experience in meeting Jesus for the first time and hearing how well the One Philip had brought him to see knew this soon-to-be disciple. Philip had been

³ The Rev. David Berkers, Minister at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Gananoque ON, excerpt from “Words of Comfort” for January 14, 2021. Underlining mine.

listening, Nathaniel listened to Philip, and then he listened to the One who had been promised for so long. What he heard took his life in a whole new, and not easy, direction.

In both of these stories, listening led to response, and that response led to God's message being proclaimed and Jesus' ministry being shared beyond the gathered crowds as the disciples went and brought others to him. When God speaks, the appropriate response is always, "I'm listening."

Listen carefully. God speaks in all kinds of ways – always has, always will.
God speaks. We listen. We respond. We follow.

We listen, and it sets us up for wanting to hear more, to listen for what will happen next, and to experience the impact God's voice will have on us, our discipleship, and the people with whom we share ministry in the name of Jesus. Thanks be to God for giving us ears to hear, hearts to understand, and the ability to really listen to what the divine voice says to us. Amen.