

Here are the links for Facebook and YouTube for the video of the 2021-Jan-24 service:

<https://www.facebook.com/WestFlamChurch/>

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCneF9IOARvh5R30Fzm-1ySA?view\\_as=subscriber](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCneF9IOARvh5R30Fzm-1ySA?view_as=subscriber)

Blessings Ian

***Listening to God's Voice in these days of Miracle and Wonder***  
***1Samuel 3:1-20***  
***January 24, 2021***

We find ourselves in the season of Epiphany, a season that highlights the manifestation to the world of Jesus as Saviour. We have two biblical characters in our readings today: one is Samuel, the other is Nathaniel. Samuel is listening, but confused; Nathaniel is also listening, but with a great deal of cynicism. Both will hear God's voice and both will respond, one to the voice of God in his sleep, the other to the persuasive presence and voice of Jesus of Nazareth.

Listening is a gift that we all need to nurture. We all like to talk, but we are not always ready to listen, to others, or to God. Many in Scripture did listen and follow. And even if it was a struggle for Noah, Abraham, among others, they listened and obeyed God's word to them. For Noah it meant salvation for him and his family, not to mention the world. For Abraham it meant the birth of a new line of ancestors through whom the world would be blessed. Samuel's listening opened a way into a new phase of Israel's history.

Israel waits for something to happen. All looks bleak and without promise. They are a group of scattered tribes, without political power or unity, and without a charismatic leader. And to add misery on top of this, they have a corrupt priesthood who are skimming off the top. Because of this we are told that, ***the word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread.*** No one appears to be listening!

Isn't it fascinating that this momentous turning point in Israel's history began with an ordinary woman's prayer? Hannah may have quickly left the stage of Israel's history, but her son would become the prominent figure who helps set Israel on a new path to covenant faithfulness. Without her listening, her praying, Israel would have been left in the dark.

Who among us today are listening to God's voice and discerning the way forward for the church in this age of skepticism about the church and its future? The world of official church, or as Diane Butler Bass calls it, ***Christianity after Religion***, will be transformed by people who are listening and praying for God to change things. Like Hannah, there are many today listening to discern our way forward.

One night Samuel went to bed as usual, but this night he heard a voice saying his name, "Samuel, Samuel." Thinking it was Eli calling him, Samuel responded, Here I am, and ran to Eli. But Eli hadn't called him and told him to go back to bed. Three times this happened. The last time Eli realized that God was calling the boy and told him to respond, *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening*. God told Samuel that he was about to do something new in Israel and would punish the house of Eli for their greed and disobedience. Because of the grim message Samuel was reluctant to relay it to Eli but the priest insisted that he tell him everything God had said. Hence it was that Samuel would be Israel's leader from that day forward.

As we live out these days of miracle and wonder, in which we see and hear things never imagined by previous generations. The lyrics that inspire the title of this sermon come from Paul Simon's ***Boy in the Bubble***:

***These are the days of miracle and wonder  
This is the long distance call  
The way the camera follows us in slo-mo  
The way we look to us all***

I think of my father who never traveled more than a hundred miles from his home, who never had a phone, who never had a television or a car. We are not talking about our great-grandfathers who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; we are talking about a person who lived through the

first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century! My grandchildren are growing up with smart phones that connect them to the worldwide web, and who are able to communicate with friends in other cities and countries in seconds. The revolution in communications and technology has transformed our lives: by the speed and amount of information available, the democratization of available knowledge, and the free access we now have into hitherto inaccessible information. In this new world of immediate access to worlds of ideas and events, are we in the church adjusting to this new reality? How seriously are we adapting to this new world of online presence? Or do we think that we can simply carry on as usual as if none of this revolution has happened? Are we listening? And to what?

Where does our spiritual antenna point? Do we listen for God's voice in all this massive change? I know it can be difficult to focus on our spiritual listening when we are bombarded with so many voices calling for our attention today. Amid the cacophony of voices who is directing our path?

We live in a society drowning in communication and yet the weighty words of God are rare indeed. Even in our dying Christendom, our mainline Protestant glory days far behind us, we often struggle to hear God's word amid all the white noise that surrounds us today. Oftentimes our churches resort to mere stubbornness, our decision to retreat into the past and resist change is commonplace. This will be our undoing as a denomination if we don't learn to listen.

The reality is that Western society, especially those under 40, is tuned into an array of different voices from the ones the church had controlled prior to 1960. The fact that the mouse only understands mouse language in **Alice in Wonderland** never occurred to Alice. It has often struck me that churches and their institutional bodies, like Presbytery, still communicate in a language foreign to most 21<sup>st</sup> century folks. I know the communication is intended to be in English, but the layers of ancient, technical, bureaucratic speech make it sound like a foreign language to most today. It makes we wonder sometimes if the church is content to swim in its own private pool of meaning, a sort of **churchese**. I suspect that if we want to invite people into our faith communities, we will need to communicate in language that is conversant with their world of meaning. We need to

be able to bridge the gap that has opened up between church culture and the world “out there”. We want to say to them, ***come and see!***

Nathaniel is willing to listen. Philip was invited by Jesus to *come and see*, and he has been convinced. Philip then invites his friend Nathanael to *come and see*. Nathaniel is skeptical at the start. His initial attitude towards Jesus is based on his preconceptions and his contempt for Nazareth, from which he thinks nothing good can come. However, his actual experience of Jesus changes his mind. Nathaniel’s faith is solid. We witness him still there with the disciples at the resurrection account of Jesus making breakfast for them.

But Nathaniel is no different from many of our friends and families. They too share this skepticism about Jesus’ claims. In some cases, people have been blinded by their preconceptions about the church, just as Nathanael was blinded by his preconceptions about Nazareth. What they have experienced in churches, many first hand, has convinced them that we are not worth listening to. We don’t speak a language that reaches deep enough to resolve their fundamental disquiet and resolve their spiritual search! Have we failed to root the message of Jesus into the heart of who we are as church? Is our faith deep enough to persuade people of its reality? Have we offered people a coherent vision for life amid all the white noise around us? If we are convinced that Christian faith in Jesus holds the truth about human life, then we must, in all earnestness, show people how that truth makes sense and is embodied in our own lives, and how it relates to the world we live in. The gap must be bridged!

Is the church really listening? Are we aware that God is doing a new thing and that new Samuels are being raised up in order to change the status quo of our religious establishments? Is our reticence to ask people to, *come and see*, really because we lack confidence in our church leadership, or that we are in touch with modern society and know how to relate the gospel to this new world of meaning and wonder? Perhaps we are not convinced that our church culture will attract them! Perhaps we are not comfortable with our sometimes-outdated language and that our culture of judgment will be embarrassing to the invited! Is this what is keeping us from inviting and saying to our neighbours and friends, ***come and see!***

Of course, this assumes a) that our people actually **have** found something that is important to them at church and b) that they are able to **name and share that**. So, I wonder, next time you get an opportunity, if you'd be willing to test those assumptions. Would you be willing, that is, after hearing this story of Nathaniel, to ask our church folk to answer two questions. **First**, what is your favorite thing about the life we share in this faith community? **Second**, would you be willing to invite someone you know to come and see and share this aspect of our congregational life that you enjoy?

By the way we asked these questions in our congregational survey as part of our visioning questionnaire. We asked, a) what do you like about WF? And b) what would you like to change/improve upon? And c) what do you think the church's role is, or why do we exist? We received lots of interesting responses, some of which tell me that there is an opportunity for us to really take our culture seriously and not to resist change!

So how is our listening? Have we managed to tune out the babble of voices so that we can hear that still voice within that echoes God's voice within us? Are we like Samuel who finally listened and heard God's message to him? Are we like Nathaniel whose skepticism about Jesus and Nazareth was challenged and defeated by the depth and reality of his experience of Jesus' presence? What is God telling you and me, and our church, to be and do in these days of miracle and wonder?

In an advertisement for an online course to support building new communities of faith, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, suggested that it involves building ministries that create and structure meaningful communities that connect people deeply. Such communities would be so much easier to invite people **to come and see!**

**Amen**