

## Prayer

Recently, I reread an article about preaching that reminded me of an important fact. When we start, preachers have between 8 and 18 seconds before the people in the pews decide whether or not they're going to pay attention to the rest of the message. If the numbers are accurate, that means some of you have already decided and probably won't even hear this sentence because you're trying to find this week's announcements. It also means, however, that I'm just about to lose the rest of you. So, I want to see if I can buy myself a few more seconds by telling a story.

Like nearly every president of the United States of America, Franklin Roosevelt was routinely required to endure the ponderously long receiving lines that are a part of official White House dinners and receptions. Complaining to his close friends, Mr. Roosevelt revealed his suspicion that very few of his guests paid attention to what he said to them as he shook their hands. To prove his point, he conducted a small experiment.

Standing in the very next receiving line, President Roosevelt replaced his usual, official greeting with a smile and then leaned in to deliver a strange, whispered confession, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The reaction of his guests proved his suspicion correct. Down the line, the polite responses continued, "Wonderful! We think you're doing an excellent job, Mr. President. Thank you for tonight."

Over and over, the guests were so preoccupied that they seemed to ignore what the president had said—until Mr. Roosevelt shook hands with the ambassador to Bolivia and made the same confession. The ambassador, without missing a beat, leaned back toward his host and replied, "I'm sure she had it coming, Mr. President."

I've been really tempted to repeat Mr. Roosevelt's experiment—especially at home. I know, however, that the result probably wouldn't be that different. At home, nobody really listens to what I say. So many times I'm aware that my mouth is moving and I somehow am able to still hear my voice, but I believe I'm the only one. I've really started to wonder if someone else's prayer has finally been answered and, although I have yet to realize it, I've actually been rendered permanently mute!

In reality, my wife and daughters will tell you that, most of the time, what I have to say is rarely relevant, useful, or even amusing. And, they're likely to be right. Probably too often, what I have to say is only noise—which, truthfully, allows me to be less offended when no one really listens to me, usually.

Okay, so we've made it way past the 18 second mark, and at least some of you are still with me—which is really comforting! Eighteen seconds is the maximum amount of time most Americans will give to a television show as they wheel through the options. Some of us can make up our minds in eight seconds, but very few people will sit through more than 18 if the show can't sink the hook.

The explanation of our "short attention span" is complex, but experts agree that, fundamentally, one fact is certain. A person's commitment to paying attention depends upon our ability to distinguish between purposeful information and useless noise. If we can't tell the difference between information that matters and mindless babbling, we tune out both and wait, or we get busy creating our own purposes and plans.

Okay, so now we're reaching the breaking point. Even the most attentive are looking for the payoff. So, let's me quickly introduce you to the boy, Samuel, and his elderly master, Eli. The priest, Eli, is so old he's lost almost all of his senses. He can't see. For sure, he can't hear well, and Samuel would tell us that he can't smell his own body odor, anymore. Samuel, who's probably something like twelve, is Eli's apprentice, personal assistant, spoon-feeder, and bathroom attendant. When the old priest needs him, Samuel's duty is to come running—day or night.

So, when it's the middle of the night and Samuel hears his name being called, he rubs the sleep out of his eyes and dutifully goes to Eli's side. When Samuel nudges the old man, Eli wakes and says, "What?" "You called me," replies Samuel. "No, I didn't," Eli says and uses his sleeve to wipe the drool from the corner of his mouth, "Go back to sleep." Eli rolls over and is asleep before Samuel has left the room.

But the same thing keeps happening, and Samuel keeps waking Eli. Each time, Eli gets slightly more perturbed—until, finally, maybe just to get some sleep, Eli tells Samuel

that it's God calling Samuel's name. Eli tells him, "Just tell Him you're listening, and wait for Him to respond." Then, Eli rolls over one more time and prays that Samuel leaves him alone, now. "Good grief. I wish the boy would quit eating chocolate before bed. He's killing me," Eli says to himself, and tries to rejoin his dreams.

But Samuel's obedient. He lies back down, and waits. Sure enough, a few minutes later Samuel hears his name being called, again. He repeats Eli's words, but he had to be shocked when the same voice begins to speak more than Samuel's name. What Samuel hears is nothing less than the God's voice. Samuel hears the voice of God—the voice that called Samuel's own name and now speaks the future into existence.

Now, here's the thing. Samuel hearing God's voice doesn't seem like a big thing to us. After all, this is a story from the Bible. On every other page, somebody's listening to God's verbal instructions. But the author of Samuel tells us one important fact that gets lost in our compression of time. In describing the context of Samuel's story, he says, "The word of the LORD was rare in those days." Maybe more literally, "Since hardly anybody was listening, anymore, God got quiet and waited to be heard."

As they went about their day-to-day busy-ness, fewer and fewer people took time to actually pay attention to what God was saying. Fewer and fewer people were committed to listening to God's voice until, finally, God just pretty much just quit talking—or we forget how to recognize his voice.

Along comes a boy, in the middle of the night, attentively listening for his master's call. In the wee, small hours of the dark morning, he hears his own name, and he goes running. Two more times, he faithfully answers the call, but, the final time, he begins to understand that it's God's voice calling his name. For the rest of that boy's life, that voice shapes him, that voice leads him and his people away from danger and toward prosperity. For the rest of his life, the ability to recognize and listen to that guiding voice of love keeps Samuel—and Israel—from being destroyed. That voice leads them to David and to a period of true shalom, true peace.

And all of that loving providence comes from one boy's developed ability to distinguish God's voice from the noise and voices around him—an ability developed in the stillness of the dark night.

You and I live in a world with more noise than human beings have ever known. We live in a culture that actively works to fill every millisecond of our lives with some kind of sound, working to fill every surface we see with an image intended to lead us in a particular direction—a culture that relentlessly offers us promises of pre-discerned purpose.

“Buy this, and you'll finally be happy. Use our service, and you'll be freed from all your worries. Follow us, and we'll show you how to be fulfilled.” Noise. It's just so much noise.

I've discovered that one of the only places left that isn't filled up is in places like a back yard, in the very brief period of early morning before they realize I'm awake and start offering to fix me. In those dark and still moments, the quietness will still allow us to hear—maybe even to hear the voice of God.

There's just one thing. To hear God's voice, you and I actually have to be quiet, our selves. To pay attention to God's voice, we have to let everything else go—if just for a minute or two. For that precious time—time when we quit talking and only one person has our attention—for that precious time, the sound that reaches our soul is the voice of the only one who can give us purpose, with any real clue of how to get us back home.

Truthfully, though, it's so much easier just to remain immersed in the noise. It's really takes so little effort just to drown out that quiet voice, and do what we want to do. It's the path of least resistance to keep the volume turned up—even though that voice is loving us and giving us directions home. Maybe we don't need the help, after all.

Or, maybe we do. And maybe all we have to do is to be quiet and listen for the quiet voice that calls our names. It may not tell us only the things we want to hear, but it will always tell us the truth. And it will always keep talking as long as we keep paying attention. Thank you, Samuel, for simply showing us how to listen. Amen.