

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
Roland P. Perdue, Interim Pastor  
Sunday, January 22, 2012

**The Red-tailed Hawk at 300 West 5<sup>th</sup> Street**  
I Samuel 3:1-10

I was standing at a window in the office I use in the Ministers' Suite. The window overlooks Settlers' Cemetery. A lot goes on in that cemetery; there are graves and markers, of course, and memories galore, people walking dogs, or dogs walking people as the case may be. Sometimes I think it is the liveliest place in Uptown.

And as I stood at the window, I would have missed it if it had not fluffed its feathers.

The sudden movement caught my eye. Perched on a high branch, it looked for prey in Settlers' Cemetery below. Later on I began to see it and a companion flying in the early mornings and then again before nightfall. They were beautiful, gliding and swooping between, among and above the buildings of Uptown Charlotte. For me it was a rare thing; something I now anticipate daily.

**Another rare thing concerns the story of Samuel.**

It begins: "The Word of the Lord was rare in those days;" or "In those days it was rare for Yahweh to speak; visions were uncommon" (I Samuel 3:1b). People were clamoring for new leadership, a new form of governance was desired, an aggressive and warring people threatened at the borders, confidence was undermined, institutions were not trusted, the priesthood and other formerly trusted leaders were a disgrace. The author of I Samuel suggests that a woman by the name of Hannah and her condition seemed to symbolize the nation's plight: she was barren, unable to bring forth anything good.

Hannah longs for a child. She prays for help and understanding. She pledges to dedicate a son to God's service. And in relaxed confidence in God, she and Elkanah conceive and Samuel is birthed. God's activity in Hannah's life, as with Sara before and Elizabeth later, is an active and impregnating Word to those who will listen.

When I cry to God, when I find myself pleading with the Lord, I do not expect to hear a distinctive auditory sound from God. I do not expect to actually hear God speak with a North Carolinian accent, or any other accent. I do not hear voices, especially not God's audible voice. But I do expect to hear from the Lord. I do. I expect to hear God speak in today's events, in our current struggles for justice and compassion.

Mary Anne is a dear and long-time friend of ours. She gave birth to a child, a son, with Down Syndrome. Her father visited her in the hospital shortly after the birth and said, "God chooses only special people to raise a special child like Taylor." Mary Anne will

tell you she heard God's Voice in the comforting words of her daddy. Yes, God's word may be rare in those days and in these days, but it is not unheard of.

I expect to hear God's voice telling me to do something that is close at hand: take care of those matters entrusted to me, be accountable to my family and colleagues, work for compassion and justice, vote for those who come closest to the ideals of liberty and justice for all, and serve the God who knows me and chooses to love me. I expect to hear God telling me that if I can't hear anything new from God, then do what God has most recently said: "Feed my lambs, care for my sheep. Tend my garden."

Of course, the word of the Lord is rare – hardly ever heard anew- if we have not obeyed and done what God has already told us. It just may be that it is not God who rarely speaks but we who rarely listen.

**God does not address us in a vacuum or in some general, vague context.**

God speaks to us a personal word in the particulars of our daily existence. The text reminds us that the Lord God does not call Samuel to service in some kind of vague and general way. Samuel is summoned by the Lord when Eli needs to be replaced as priest, when his sons have failed to be faithful and have disgraced their calling by stealing and loose sexual behavior in the sanctuary in Shiloh, when Israel is confused about her political identity and desires a king like other nations, and when the Philistines are causing trouble on the borders. Samuel is called exactly when God needs him in specific ways. God does not call us in a vacuum.

God speaks personally to us, not in human words, but in words and experiences which fit the context of our daily lives.

I have an old friend. He suffers from a compulsive addiction to gambling. He was risking everything and losing everything. His life, family – all were in jeopardy. He visited my office one late evening and told me that he had been going to a Twelve-Step program, Gambling Anonymous. And then he said, with no little passion, "Roland, I have been saved! Saved! O, I don't mean in some vague, religious sense. I mean *really saved!* I have stopped gambling! I am saved!"

Ted was not speaking of being saved in some general, non specific way. But, rather, saved, made whole and recovering in a particular area in the context of his daily life. At least this is the way Jesus told us God speaks to us.

My oldest son worships and serves through a church in Austin, Texas, which is very specific in programming and in themes. Currently the Gateway Church operates on several campuses and is offering worship and small groups on Recovery. Here's the thing: it is not just Recovery in general, not merely transformation in a vague "one fits all" sort of way. Rather they have a sequential series: Debt Recovery, Alcohol, Drugs, Gambling, and Sexual Recovery, Abuse Recovery. The church holds three Sunday

morning services crowded with twenty-five and thirty year olds. I mean “crowded” and lively. And, I hate to admit it, no name tags!

The Word of the Lord was rare in those days; rare, but not unheard of to those who listen.

**Mostly, however, someone tells us that we’re hearing things and just need to go back to sleep.**

That’s what dissipated old Eli first told Samuel. ”Go back to sleep and quit brothing me.” He did not want to hear of Israel’s political and religious dishonesty, the lurid behavior of his sons, the failure of government. It was said that in those days “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” How like today that sounds!

Don’t stay awake thinking about what the church might do to help out. Don’t wonder what good we did in Iraq, Afghanistan, what promises will be made by our politicians and what promises will ever be fulfilled. Go back to bed.

Whenever you and I can’t sleep at night, we may be close to hearing that rare word from God, a time of new vision and renewal. Samuel hears his name called and he goes to Eli. But Eli, as the church does so often, said, “Go back to sleep and quit bothering me!” Just imagine what would have been lost if Abraham and Sara had stayed asleep. Or Jesus, Martin Luther and Jean Calvin!

Don’t go back to sleep; God is trying to get through to us again. Don’t go back to sleep. Stay awake. Stay awake, Mother Teresa. Stay awake, Martin Luther King. Stay awake, First Presbyterian Church; there is a new pastor to call, there are issues and concerns facing us more important than worrying about clapping or not clapping in worship, there are votes to cast, people to elect. For God’s sake, stay awake!

**The Word of the Lord was rare in those days, there were no frequent vision. But the Lamp of the Lord had not gone out.**

Are you listening? “The Lamp of the Lord had not gone out.” It may have flickered a bit and dimmed, but it has not gone out. O, more than a mere statement of fact is that! On one level it simply means the oil in the lamp kept it burning all night. At another level it is a clue, an indication, that Samuel hears God’s invitation to him in the evening when still dark. But at another level it is a word of improvisational grace to hold on to in the near darkness of this or any other age.

However dark you and I may think it is, the light still shines, the lamp still glows, the Light of the world still walks with us and guides us to God. The lamp still burns, the nightlight is on. The way can still be found.

I’m a big boy now and I am not afraid of the dark. But I still need a nightlight these days. As Jane and I move around, I often wake up in the evening and do not remember

immediately where I am. And where, O where, is the bathroom? Thank God for the nightlight. The Word is rare, but the lamp has not gone out entirely.

There is “oil in the lamp” at Ole First Church. The lamp is burning brightly here. And this church is filled with “lamplighters!”

It is a rare thing you did for this last year’s giving of your energies, skills and finances. You fulfilled financial commitments at a record high of 97% of pledges. You provided a surplus of more than \$70,000. You will vote the first increase in staff salaries in three years. 187 families – families, not individuals! – committed a variety of skills to be used in the church and through the church’s mission and outreach. You did all of that in an Interim, Transitional Year. God is doing wonderful, gracious things here, and because of God’s grace you are in a fine place as your PNC to continue its search for a new pastor whose skills are equal to your vision as you hear the rare word of the Lord in these days. All of this is rare. But it does not really surprise me.

And somehow or another, it was not nearly as rare as getting off the elevator in our parking garage three days before Christmas and ducking as I sensed something swoop just above my head. At first I thought it was a bat or the sparrow I sometimes hear and see in the garage. But I could not quite believe it when I watched it glide to the other end of the garage. It was a Red-tailed hawk. I quickly got back in the elevator and saw the hastily lettered sign I missed on the way down. It read:

Hawk in Upper Parking Level  
Game Control has been called  
Be Careful  
Concierge

Yes, be careful, for though the word of the Lord may be rare in these days, it is not unheard of.

Amen.