

¹ Samuel 3:1 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." ¹¹ Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.

^{John 1:14} And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

We Believe: Revelation

1 Samuel 3:1-11

John 1:14-18

Today we begin a sermon series entitled, “We Believe,” about the things our Presbyterian tradition, well, believes. I have a couple of goals in doing this. The first is to show that these things are not dry, academic topics – they are a conversation about the way we experience God, and the things we’ve learned through Scripture and time.

Mostly, I want to be sure everyone understands that I am not telling you what to believe. I’m not saying, “This is what Presbyterians believe, and you’re a Presbyterian, so this is what you should believe.” What I am saying is there are lots of faith statements going around these days and our own Presbyterian tradition has some pretty cool ideas that deserve to be heard and considered. After listening and considering, you may decide to believe or you may not. My prayer is that the process of listening and considering will be a vehicle through which the Holy Spirit will grow and shape our faith a little more.

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I had the privilege this week of attending a performance of a play entitled, *The Christians*, written by Lucas Hnath. It’s about a pastor named Paul who experiences a spiritual crisis. The result of this crisis is that he decides he no longer believes in hell. Without any previous notice, even to his wife, he announces this change to his congregation in a Sunday sermon, with, as you might expect, dramatic consequences.

His associate pastor walks out of the worship service after a public argument between the two. The president of the board of elders confronts Pastor Paul with the board’s concerns about what this is going to do to their budget, and before long, most of the choir has gotten up and left, too. Even his marriage is affected.

At the heart of this play is the theme of today’s sermon: *revelation* – the belief that God reveals to us his character and plan. Do you remember when Moses asks God to let Moses see him, and God says, “No one can see me and live,” but God puts him in the cleft of a rock so he can catch a glimpse of God’s glory as he walks by? Moses doesn’t see much, but he does see something, and that is revelation. We may not be able to see or understand very much of God’s endless mystery, but God does enable us to see something.

As William Placher puts it, “Both Protestants and Catholics...agree that we cannot figure out for ourselves anything like an adequate knowledge of God. For that, we have to depend on something God gives us—revelation.”¹ If it weren’t for God’s revealing his nature, truth, and plan to us, we would be left to our own limited intelligence, and we would be lost. We may be able to figure out that the universe is 14 billion years old; we may be able to figure out how to walk on the moon, but those things are first-grade math compared to figuring out God. For that, God must supply a cheat sheet – God must give us the answers.

Revelation means that God loves us too much to let us remain clueless. He puts us in the cleft of a rock so we can catch just a glimpse as he walks by. It’s not face-to-face, but it’s something.

The story we read a few minutes ago about young Samuel being called by God is endearing and humorous – the poor boy keeps thinking his mentor Eli is calling him in the night, until Eli finally figures out what’s going on and tells Samuel to say, “Here I am, Lord...speak, for your servant is listening.” When he does so, God tells him, “I’m about to tell you something that will make *both* ears of everyone who hears it tingle.”

God does, indeed, speak to us. Don’t take that literally – rarely do we hear God’s actual voice – but, the message God speaks makes our ears – *both of our ears* – tingle. When we experience revelation, it doesn’t just make our ears tingle, it causes a vibration that shakes the foundations of our lives. It rocks our world. I love Daniel Migliore’s quote on the cover of today’s bulletin: “*Revelation is the disclosure of the character and purpose of God, and when it is received, it radically changes the lives of its recipients.*”²

It is impossible to encounter God and walk away the same person. You may walk away with a limp, as Jacob did, or you may walk away with a glow, like Moses did, but you always walk away a changed person. Sometimes the change is so radical it is like being born again. Sometimes our response is “Aha! Now I understand!” Sometimes it is, “Wow!” It may be “Uh-oh.” It may be tears of wonder or of conviction. It may be a wordless falling to our knees that we have been brought into the presence of the great God of all that is. When the prophet Isaiah finds himself in the presence of God, he is driven to cry out, “Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and I have come into the presence of the Most High God!”

Most of us pray that tingling ears is all that happens!

Of course, we Christians believe that the fullest revelation of the nature and purpose of God is in Jesus Christ. John’s gospel tells us this morning that “...*the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth...No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son... who has made him known.*” More than a mere glimpse from between the cleft in a rock, Jesus is the full revelation of who God is and what

¹ Placher, William C., ed. Essentials of Christian Theology. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition, 2003, p. 12

² Migliore, Daniel L., Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology, third ed. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Kindle Edition, 2008, p. 23.

God is about. In fact, there's a scene in John 14 that is very much like Moses in the wilderness asking God to let Moses see him. Philip asks Jesus, "*Show us the Father and we will be completely satisfied.*" Jesus answers with just a tad of impatience, "*Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*"

God so loved the world that he could not remain distant, unknown, uninvolved. Jesus came into the world to reveal God's love for us; to reveal God's nature and purpose and plan to us. In his love, he emptied himself of the glory of heaven and became one of us. His death on the cross reveals the full depth of his love for us. He reveals a God who is love, and who calls his people to love one another. We would not be here today; we would not be a people; there would be no religion called Christianity if there was not first and most fundamentally, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

So, I started out by telling you about this play in which Pastor Paul believes he has a revelation that there is no hell. It comes to him after hearing of a heroic little boy who saved a missionary's daughter from a burning building, but in the process, the little boy died. The missionary tells Pastor Paul of his grief that the little boy died not knowing Jesus' salvation, and is now in hell. Pastor Paul is so disturbed by the missionary's statement he prays about it and, he hears God speaking to him, telling him that that little boy is standing right beside God in heaven, because there is no hell.

After the pastor shares this in his sermon, Associate Pastor Joshua gets up to offer the prayers for the people and when he's done, he continues to stand at the pulpit. Paul asks him if something is wrong. Joshua pauses for a moment, gathers his courage, then says that he feels in his heart that God is telling *him* that Pastor Paul is contradicting God's Word; and that if Paul really believes what he has said, Joshua feels God telling *him* that Paul is no longer his brother in Christ.

As I drove home afterward, I couldn't help thinking about all of the times in the history of the Christian faith that we have struggled with the concept of revelation – what we believe is God's truth, and what is not; what God is showing us is right and what is wrong. We have struggled here in our own congregation, trying to discern together what God is saying to us and where God is leading us. And sometimes we, too, have known the pain of division in our beliefs about these things. We have lost a few families because of decisions we have made recently; and, just this week I received a letter from someone who was dropping their membership because of decisions our denomination has made in the last few years.

Revelation is an awesome thing – God revealing to us his nature and plan – but we are imperfect, finite beings and it is so easy for us to get mixed up about what is God's truth and what are our subjective feelings, or what is cultural truth instead of divine truth, or hearing part of God's message but the rest has been garbled like a cellphone with a weak signal. And so the last thing we need to remember about revelation is to be very humble about it in ourselves and very respectful about it in others. We should always entertain the possibility that we might be hearing God wrong, and someone else might be hearing God correctly.

Some of the worst atrocities in human history – including today – have been committed by people who were absolutely certain their understanding of God's will was correct and anyone who saw it otherwise was God's enemy. Even while we celebrate the gift of revelation, may we never, in God's name, judge anyone to be outside God's circle of grace because we have God's truth and they don't, for in the moment that we do so, Jesus says, we stand in danger of being judged the same.

Karl Barth, the German Reformed theologian whose faith was shaped and tested by Adolf Hitler's attempts to incorporate the German church into the ideology of the Third Reich, spoke these wise words:

*"The God who spoke his decisive word in Jesus Christ is not a dead God like the fools are saying today. Instead, this is the lively God who also speaks today...But be warned! This is where mistakes happen again and again, when people think, 'Now I've got it!' And that's why we must continue to look where God revealed himself most clearly and completely, in Jesus Christ, who was true God and true man, and still is today, and will be forever."*³

Amen.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2jbc03ujLk>