

The First Congregational Church of Wakefield, United Church of Christ
Sunday, 19 January 2003 — Second Sunday after Epiphany
The Rev. John Tamilio III, Pastor

Sermon: “Ears Wide Open” (John 1:43-51 and 1 Samuel 3:1-10)

I have been thinking about our old town of Wakefield a lot lately. Actually, I have been thinking about how cold it gets here. My first two winters in Wakefield were relatively mild. Last winter was a bit worse. This winter is unbelievable! When I interviewed with the Search Committee, they told me that winters up here can get pretty rough. I now know what they were talking about!

I actually haven't been thinking about the weather, but I have been thinking about the Search Committee. Specifically, I have been thinking about the process of searching for and accepting a call. *No, I am not planning on going anywhere*, Elizabeth Fogg. My friend Jeff Gallagher, who many of you know, is just about finished with seminary. He is at the stage I was at exactly four years ago. He is preparing for his Ecclesiastical Council and is feverously putting his ministerial profile together so that he can start searching for a church as soon as possible. It is an exciting time for him. It brought back a lot of memories for me. Good memories. Good memories that actually started out bad.

Once my profile was finalized, I sent it to over two dozen churches. Sue and I found all the open churches within a two hour radius of Boston and sent my profile to all the ones that interested me: big churches, little churches, associate pastorates, and sole pastorates. You name it. You see, every professional job that I every held in my short career came after sending out hordes of resumes. I thought the church would be the same. Within a couple of weeks, I heard from about fifteen churches. Sue and I realized that we needed to trim down the list a little bit. We decided to focus our energies on the half a dozen or so churches that appealed to us the most. Then, the interview process began.

What a nightmare! I know that I shared this with some of you, but I don't think I ever used it as a sermon illustration. It was frightening. The first church I interviewed with was having serious financial trouble. During my interview they presented me with an idea. “We're thinking of taking a big piece of poster board, listing all the members of the church on it and what they pledge, and hanging it in the back of the sanctuary. What do you think?” they asked me with smiles on their faces that would suggest that they had come up with the greatest discovery since sliced bread. “Not if I'm your pastor,” I said. Needless (and gladly) to say, I did not get called back for a second interview. During my interview with the next church I was given an opportunity to ask questions. I asked the Search Committee one question: “How does your congregation deal with conflict?” Honest to God: the Search Committee got into a fight. “We don't have any conflict in this church,” one member said. “Who are you kidding?” interjected another. And it just escalated from there. I called Sue from my cell phone once I left. She asked, “Are you on your way home?” “As fast as I can!” I said.

One church. Two churches. Three churches. One after another. One horror show after the next. I was getting incredibly frustrated. “Why did I ever decide to become I minister,” I said to myself. “I am never going to find a church.” And then, one night, the telephone rang. “Hi,” the vivacious voice on the other end of the line said. “My name is Connie Littlefield. I am calling from the First Congregational Church of Wakefield, New Hampshire. We just received your profile and were wondering if you had accepted a call to another church yet.” “No,” I said. “Well, we would like to set up an interview with you as soon as you can.” One thing led to another: they realized that I knew the area, having vacationed in Acton, Maine most of my life; I realized how close the church was located to Poor People's Pub. An interview was scheduled for the following Saturday.

Sue knew that this was the church for us as soon as she read your profile. I wasn't sure. It had nothing to do with your profile. Rather, there was a sour taste in my mouth left over from the other churches with which I interviewed. I drove up Route 95 and Route 16 wondering what sort of dreadful experience lay ahead of me. Connie told me that she would meet me at the church and then bring me to the Johannessen's house for dinner and the actual interview. I pulled into the parking lot and met Elizabeth Fogg, who was also meeting us at the church. I walked in to the sanctuary...and the rest is history. I had not even met the other members of the Search Committee yet. It did not matter. The moment I walked into this sanctuary, an unprecedented, indescribable feeling came over me. It was as if I heard the voice of God saying to my heart, “This is it. This is your new home.” As far as I was concerned, the rest of the interview — which only confirmed my feelings — was just a formality. I was home, and I knew it. I had found the place where God was leading me, or maybe it found me, or

maybe we found each other.

I have been telling my friend Jeff to trust God and to listen to his heart. “Keep your ears wide open,” I keep saying to him. “You will know where God is leading you when you get there.” If I based my decision on previous experience or instinct, I never would have ended up in Wakefield. I was clearly led there.

Isn’t it interesting how we often have one impression of something, but God has other plans. We have no way of foreseeing how things are going to turn out, but God knows — and if we listen carefully enough, eventually we will know as well. James Hewett tells the story of a twelve-year-old boy who became a Christian during a revival. The next week at school his friends questioned him about the experience. “Did you see a vision?” asked one friend. “Did you hear God speak?” asked another. The youngster answered no to all these questions. “Well, how did you know you were saved?” they asked. The boy searched for an answer and finally he said: “It’s like when you catch a fish, you can’t see the fish or hear the fish; you just feel him tugging on your line. I just felt God tugging on my heart.”¹ That is the story of Samuel in today’s Hebrew Bible reading and of the disciples in today’s Gospel Lesson.

As he slept in the Temple near the Ark of the Covenant — “the most sacred object in Israelite worship” — the young Samuel heard the voice of God calling to him throughout the night.² He thought it was the voice of his mentor, Eli. “Here I am, for you called me,” the young boy said to Eli three times that evening. It wasn’t until Eli instructed the boy, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,’” that Samuel truly hears the voice of God. The same is true for the disciples.

In this passage from early in John’s Gospel, Jesus calls his first disciples: two of John the Baptist’s disciples, including Andrew, as well as Andrew’s brother Simon Peter and Philip and Nathaniel. Andrew is standing with John the Baptist when he is called. Andrew fetches Simon Peter. The next day, when Philip is called, he is so overjoyed that he finds Nathaniel lying under a fig tree to tell him the news: “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” None of these first disciples were waiting specifically for Jesus. They were waiting for the coming of the Messiah, as were most Jews, but they had no idea it would be a wandering teacher from the small, secluded town of Nazareth. In fact, when Nathaniel first hears the news, he cynically responds, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Jesus calls to them in spite of themselves. When they hear, they know.

How is Jesus calling you? How is that still small voice tugging at your heart, telling you there is something that he wants you to do? Will you know when you hear it? Are your ears wide open or are they tuned in to the clamor of the world? If you rely on your own understanding or your own desires, you may never hear it. But, if you surrender your will to God’s will, you will hear it loud and clear. I saw a bumper sticker the other day that said, “Let go and let God.” That’s it! It’s that simple! *Let go and let God.*

Listen carefully, with ears wide open. You will be called and you will be led and you will be amazed at where you find yourself. Trust me. Amen.

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¹ James S. Hewett, ed. *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1988), 188.

² *The HarperCollins Study Bible, NRSV*, Wayne A. Meeks, ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), ft. nt. 3.3, p. 422.