Today at our meeting, the annual report will be distributed, highlighting activities and ministries of the past year. It will review our program and ministries of 2008 and look ahead to 2009. Sometimes it’s very interesting to look back at reports and board meeting minutes of other congregations. Let me take you back 114 years to 1895 – to the official board minutes of St. John’s United Brethren Church in Paradise, Pennsylvania.

- It was reported at a monthly meeting that one of the brothers of the church sold merchandise on the Sabbath. A committee of two was appointed to investigate the matter. He was later dropped as a member, his name was erased from the membership book and the Pastor read his name aloud from the pulpit.
- The Pastor spoke about the ‘bad order’ in church on Sunday evenings. The official Board authorized the Pastor to ‘call out any person’s name’ he saw misbehaving in church.
- “In 1895, some members’ names appeared on a list to consider the standing of their moral conduct during the year. Also, those who were delinquent in having failed to support the church and for non-attendance were listed. They numbered twenty six.”

Is this what the church should be about? “Reining in” the bad order? Taming or subduing those misbehaving – sort of like the ecclesiastical equivalent of sending the unruly child to the principal’s office! If you’re kid is acting up at home – by all means – bring him to church and we’ll straighten him out. Come in like a hellion and go out an angel. As if the sanctuary has a sanitizing and civilizing effect? A calming influence. Well not in today’s story from I Samuel. Young Samuel helped Eli around the temple – kind of a “go fer” for the elderly priest.

The writer tells us that the Word of the Lord was rare in those days. Safe from any disruptive, challenging words of God, people could show up at the temple now and then, go through a few prescribed rituals, and feel better about themselves. That was all – and old Eli tottered about the temple – keeping the altar fires lit.

Into this situation of silent, settled religion, one night, something happened. Young Samuel was lying down where the Ark of the Covenant was and heard a voice calling his name – “Samuel! Samuel!” Running to Eli, he said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Eli told him – “Listen, kid, your imagination is working over time – go back to bed.” Again the Lord called to Samuel – “Samuel! Samuel! Samuel!” Again down the hall to Eli’s room. “Here I am, Eli, for you called me.” Eli said, “Do you mind, son, I’ve got an early day tomorrow and I’d like to get to sleep – if you’re hearing things, turn on your IPOD and put your headphones on.” Back to bed and the voice called a third time – and a third trip to Eli’s room. This time, Eli figured out that it was God calling and told Samuel, “Look, hit the sack – if you hear the voice again – call God’s bluff and say – speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” Sure enough – before too long, the Lord called again and Samuel said, “Speak, Lord – I’m all ears.” After that the story doesn’t say that Samuel went back to a peaceful sleep. Little wonder – would you, could you – after hearing those voices?

Next morning Eli wanted to know what Samuel heard in the voice of God. Reluctantly at first, then with Eli’s urging, the boy told what he’d heard. There will be bad times for Eli’s house – Eli will fall – young Samuel will rise.

Does that remind you of other Bible stories? Stories about people whose lives are moving along in accustomed, conventional, predictable paths, only to be disrupted by an intrusive word, only to hear their name called, and to have their world changed.
Today’s gospel reading from John tells about how a couple of ordinary people had their lives disrupted, changed forever by hearing their names called by someone named Jesus.

The scripture from I Samuel is a promise and a warning to us. We’re promised that though in times like ours the word of God may be rare, God isn’t forever silent. One night, when we are minding our own business, or one Sunday, when we’re in church just going through the motions, there’s a voice— we hear our name called— and like little Samuel our world changes. That applies to lay persons— it also applies to pastors. If we don’t want to risk such disruption, then we’d better avoid hanging around the temple.

Is it possible that we pad our pews, that we bolt all the furniture down to the floor, that we print up the service in a bulletin, that we then carefully, deliberately move through the prescribed acts of worship out of an inner fear? We tie everything down, we make church so predictable, so settled, and fixed because, in our collective memories, we remember stories like this one. We know Bible stories of ordinary people who have heard their names called. We know that the temple, or this church, can be a dangerous and risky place to be with the living God roaming about.

You know, the word of God may not be chained down, but as one preacher observed, you’d be hard pressed to believe it on most Sunday mornings. She writes:

We read scriptures out loud as though we’re reading income tax instructions to each other’s children, draw on offering envelopes during the sermon, adults balance their checkbooks. If someone breaks the rules and gets excited by the word, there are plenty of other people— including the preacher— who can be counted on to calm that person down. We are old friends with the word by now. There’s nothing to get excited about. You can buy dish towels with the Beatitudes printed on them. You can give Bibles to your children without worrying that what they read will upset their lives. What has happened? Have we hobbled the word because we fear the harm it can do?

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to hear Tony Campolo speak to a gathering of clergy at P.T.S. He chastised clergy who have lost their passion for the gospel. He said too many of us have forgotten how strongly we felt about the proclamation of the gospel when we left the seminary classroom— that we need to reclaim and recapture the passion, the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Both clergy and laity are guilty, he said. He told of a young man who several years ago visited one of Campolo’s mission stations in Haiti and told Campolo that he was so moved by seeing the gospel in action that he was going home to enroll in medical school and become a doctor so that he could return to Haiti and put his gifts to work in providing medical services to the poor. Campolo said he saw this same man ten years later and asked the man what he was doing. “Well,” he said, “when I graduated from medical school, I saw that the real money was in plastic surgery and besides, I can now afford to drive a Porsche.” Campolo said, “You sold out, Jim, you sold out.” Have we as Christians lost our passion? Have we forgotten what life changing power there is in the Gospel? Have we sold out? On a weekend when we honor a man who said, “I have a dream,” can we not remember that the message of God’s love for all people is a radical— if not dangerous notion? Is it possible to get “used to” and complacent with the Word of God?

In her book, Teaching a Stone to Talk, Annie Dillard marvels at the nonchalance of most Christians. She writes:

On the whole I don’t find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely evoke? Or as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear
ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence. . . .

You remember the mid-60s television show *Lost in Space* – the story of space pioneers the Robinsons. “A robot was part of the crew, and he would warn young Will Robinson with “Danger, Will Robinson” and “Warning, Warning! Danger, Danger!” Maybe that’s what our greeters need to say to folk who walk in the building before they head up the stairs to the sanctuary.

Warning – Warning – God at work!

Danger – Danger – God may speak to you today!

Warning – you may have your life turned upside down. You may be called upon to stretch your notion of what it means to be church and to do church. Danger. Danger to all worshipers – the love of God and the inclusive nature of Christ’s ministry may call you to expand your circle – to break free from that small group of friends who make you feel so good, and to reach out and embrace those whom others, including the church, have shunned. Warning – run, do not walk to the nearest exit if you want to leave as the very same person you were when you came in.

You know, it’s not that we don’t know the power of the Word – it is that we do. We know the sorts of things our God is capable of saying – “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love . . . .” Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it. We know what came out of Jesus’ mouth – “Love your enemies, go sell what you have and give it to the poor. Where your treasure is, there’s where your heart really is.”

Maybe we should just be very quiet – no sense stirring up something that might break our hearts, wreck our plans, change our lives. Let’s let sleeping dogs lie. Or not – clap your hands, yell out loud, run a stick along the bars of your cell and discover who has really been asleep all this time. Decide to make noise – roar and hear the word roar back. Put on your crash helmet. Danger, members and friends of First Christian Church, Danger! Warning, Warning, Warning!

Let us pray. God, may we be your children today, hear your voice and gladly answer your call to give our lives to you, to serve your Church, to offer our gifts, and to give away our hearts to you only. Bless our hopes, the first tiny stirrings of desire, the little resolve to go forward, the small vision of what might be. Deal gently with our fears, the hesitation of uncertainty, the darkness of the unknown, the lack of confidence in our own capacity, and turn it all to trust in you.

Thanks to Leonard Sweet and Annie Dillard for their words and insights.