

**“Here I Am, Lord”**

**(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 72)**

1 Samuel 3

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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“Now the boy Samuel was serving the LORD under Eli.” (1 Samuel 3.1) Samuel’s mother Hannah had dedicated him to God when he was very young and given him over to Eli, the semi-retired priest in charge of God’s tabernacle at Shiloh. Samuel was growing up under Eli’s faithful tutelage, and tending to Israel’s most sacred objects, including the Ark of the Covenant, that chest that held the two tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments which Moses had received from God at Mount Sinai. This is *the* most sacred shrine in all of Israel; Eli is *the* most important priest; Samuel is Eli’s young apprentice.

“The LORD’s word was rare at that time, and visions weren’t widely known.” (1 Samuel 3.2) People didn’t know how to listen for God’s voice. People weren’t accustomed to hearing the Word of the Lord. They didn’t talk about it much. Important stories and teachings were being forgotten. God’s Word was being pushed to the margins; people were going about their lives as if it didn’t matter.

Kind of like today.

“One day Eli, whose eyes had grown so weak he was unable to see, was lying down in his room. God’s lamp hadn’t gone out yet” – the midnight oil was keeping the lamp burning – “and Samuel was lying down in the LORD’s temple, where God’s chest was.” (1 Samuel 3.3) It’s night. All is quiet in the tabernacle. Samuel and Eli have gone to bed, anticipating that it will be just an ordinary night, that nothing uneventful will happen between now and the coming of the new day. They are wrong.

“Samuel. Samuel.” The voice rings out in the semi-darkness, pulling young Samuel out of his slumbers. Who could it be? There’s only one other person nearby; Samuel gets up and makes his way through the curtains to Eli’s chamber. “I’m here,” he says to his master. “You called me?”

Eli’s brow furrows. His young apprentice must be hearing things. “I didn’t call you,” Eli says. “Go lie down.” Samuel returns to his chamber. *I could have sworn I heard him*, Samuel thinks to himself as he tries to lull himself back to sleep.

“Samuel. Samuel.” The voice rings out again, as penetrating in the semi-darkness the second time as it had been the first. Samuel gets up and races back through the curtains to Eli’s chamber. “I’m here,” he says again. “You called me?” Eli sighs. *What’s wrong with my apprentice?* he wonders to

himself. *Why is he hearing voices?* “I didn’t call, my son,” he says. “Go lie down.” Samuel returns to bed, perplexed. *What’s wrong with my master? Is his memory starting to fail?* What other possible explanation could there be? Samuel nestles himself back under his covers and tries again to fall asleep.

It’s at this point that the narrator chooses to tell us: “Now Samuel didn’t yet know the LORD, and the LORD’s word hadn’t yet been revealed to him.” (1 Samuel 3.7) Samuel has spent *years* growing up under the instruction of the most important priest in all Israel, serving in the holiest place in all the land, right next to the Israelites’ most sacred objects – and *he didn’t yet know the Lord*. Just because someone grows up in the church, just because someone serves in the church, doesn’t necessarily mean that someone *knows the Lord*. The Word of God has to be *revealed* to you. You have to *learn how to listen* for God’s voice. Samuel had never heard God’s voice before; *he didn’t know what it sounded like*; to him, it sounded a lot like the voice of his master. He hears a voice; there are no other people around; it doesn’t even *occur* to him that God might be trying to get his attention.

There are times when God is trying to get your attention.

“Samuel. Samuel.” A third time now, just like the first two, clear and penetrating. *Okay*, he thinks to himself. *Either my master is playing games with me, or there’s something seriously wrong with him*. He gets up, makes his way through the curtains one last time to Eli’s chamber, and says – with as much patience in his voice as he can possibly muster – “I’m here. You called me?”

“Then,” the narrator tells us, “Eli realized that it was the LORD who was calling the boy.” (1 Samuel 3.8) God’s voice was so rare, even wise old Eli didn’t recognize it the first two times. The light bulb goes off in his head. *Of course*, he thinks. God is speaking. *Why didn’t I realize it sooner?*

Sometimes it takes two or three times – or five or ten or *fifty* – before we’re wise enough to realize that God really is saying something to *us*.

Eli explains to Samuel: this is the voice of the Lord. Samuel’s eyes fill with wonder. *Really? The LORD is speaking to ME?!?* Eli instructs him to lie down again, and if he hears the voice a fourth time, to say, “Speak, LORD. Your servant is listening.” Eli encourages Samuel to present himself before God with an open, receiving, trusting heart. You can’t go wrong with that kind of an attitude toward God.

So Samuel returns to his chamber, this time not with worry about his master but with anticipation about what might yet happen in this extraordinary night. *Is God really going to speak?*

Sure enough, the voice calls one final time: “Samuel. Samuel.” Samuel’s eyes pop wide open. He wants to run to his master, but he overcomes that urge and instead faces the divine presence directly as it speaks to his heart. “Speak,” Samuel says meekly. “Your servant is listening.”

You may have heard a sermon or two on this passage before. I’ve heard some good ones, including one absolutely *fabulous* and immensely stirring sermon given in the traditional African-American style. Most sermons on this passage stop right at this point, with Samuel listening – for the first time in his life – to God’s voice. Usually the message is about being open and receptive to God’s voice, which is certainly a good message, often accompanied by words of praise for Samuel’s willingness

to listen attentively to what God might be telling him. But do any of you know what God actually *said* to Samuel after that? What the *Word of the Lord* was for Samuel that night?

It wasn't a message that Samuel wanted to hear.

Eli had two sons, Hophni and Phineas, who were scoundrels and hypocrites. We heard about them last week. They were stealing from the sacrifices and sleeping with serving girls. Here in this chapter we learn that they were also cursing God. Yet they're *priests*. Their actions were betraying everything their ordination vows stood for. Eli knew what they were doing, and he had done very little to correct their behavior. Maybe he thought that they would figure it out on their own. God wanted Eli to step up to the plate and hold his sons accountable for their faithless deeds; God had sent a prophet to judge Eli and his whole household, proclaiming that a day would come when Eli's sons would both die on the same day. What God says to Samuel that night in the tabernacle follows on all of that. "I am about to do something in Israel," God says. "I will bring to pass against Eli everything I said about his household – every last bit of it!" Samuel listens as God proclaims the doom that is to come. What's the Word of the Lord to Samuel? *Judgment against his own master*. Samuel doesn't sleep well that night.

It's important that we recognize this truth: when you listen for God's voice, when you really open your ears, you are not always going to hear what you want to hear. You are not always going to hear words of comfort or hope or joy. We want God to only say things that make us feel good, cozy, comfortable – *and he doesn't*. God tells us *truth*. Sometimes, that truth is painful. Sometimes, it hurts.

In the morning Samuel has to face his master. "Samuel, my son!" Eli's voice calls out. Samuel walks carefully, deliberately, to his master's room. "I'm here," he says. Eli looks at him eagerly: "What did the LORD say to you?" Samuel pauses. He's afraid. He doesn't want to tell his master what God said to him. "Don't hide anything from me," Eli pleads. He invokes God's name and bids Samuel to speak.

There come those times in our lives when we have to have a conversation with someone that we don't want to have. An important conversation with your spouse. Confronting your child about something they've been hiding from you. Challenging your aging parent who has unrealistic ideas about what they can or can't do. Telling your boss or your colleagues that you really messed something up and it's going to hurt the whole team. Coming clean with what you really believe about something. There are those times when God tells us, "It's time. You can't let this go on. You've *got* to say something." And you're scared to pieces because you don't know what the response will be. An angry outburst? Rejection? Ridicule? Will you lose your job? Lose your marriage? It's tempting to chicken out, to pretend there's not really an issue, to try to go about your day as if everything is right with the world.

You know as well as I do: that never works. Your stomach is tied up in knots, you know you're being dishonest with yourself and with God if you don't speak up, your conscience isn't letting you off the hook. God is speaking; the Holy Spirit is moving; it's up to *you* to make the next move.

"Don't hide anything from me," Eli says to young Samuel. He invokes God's name and bids Samuel to talk. Samuel lifts his head, looks squarely at his master, and opens his mouth to speak....

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