

“Speak, Lord!”

1 Samuel 3:1-10

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We have before us this morning a wonderful story that has to do with *listening to and heeding* the voice of God. Those are, of course, things we should be attempting to do all the time. It is all the more critical when the country is in crisis – that we not just listen to and follow the voices of the people who tell us what we *want* to hear, but that we really listen for *God*, who tells us what we *need* to hear.

The story is about a young lad named Samuel, who is basically serving as an apprentice to a priest in a small little temple. This story takes place before the great huge temple was built in the city of Jerusalem. The ark of the covenant – which contains the words of the Ten Commandments, and upon which (as the Israelites believed) resided the very presence of God – is there, in this little shrine. So this temple is the guardian of Israel’s most sacred possession. This is where young Samuel serves. “Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli.” That’s the priest; that’s his superior; he’s in his upper years. Eli has a couple adult sons who have gone wildly astray from following the Lord. We are told, in the stories surrounding this one, that they were “blaspheming God” (1 Samuel 3:13); they were misappropriating the sacrifices that people brought to the temple (1 Samuel 2:12-17); and they were sleeping with the women who helped serve in the temple (1 Samuel 2:22). So we have an old man, and a young boy, and a lost generation in between. “The word of the Lord was rare in those days,” the story says. “*The word of the Lord was rare in those days.*” People didn’t know God. At least, not many people did.

This story follows hard on the heels of the book of Judges, the final chapters of which describe all sorts of injustices and atrocities that were going on in the land of Israel. There is rape, murder, dismemberment, genocide, mass kidnappings, and even civil war. One commentator describes it like this: “Israel becomes a barbaric nation ruled by whomever the biggest bully on the playground happens to be.” People are driven by vain ambition, selfishness, and greed; there is recklessness, lawlessness, and a tremendous amount of violence; people are lying and stealing and killing; the founding principles of the nation have been forgotten or are under assault. Does that sound at all familiar? I am not making this up; you can read it for yourselves, right there in your Bible. *Israel was a mess!* “The word of the Lord was rare in those days,” the Bible says. When you’ve got that much chaos going on, that much mayhem, that much sinfulness, “the word of the Lord was *rare* in those days” ... or ... in *these* days.

But there’s a young boy with a good heart, serving in a temple. The temple is there because some people still care about God. Eli is there because he still wants to serve God – at least, he still wants to perform his priestly duties. But his sons, who are also priests, have gone wildly astray, and Eli is not doing a blessed thing about it. He’s not stopping them; he’s not reining them in; he’s not holding them accountable. He’s old, he’s frail; his sons could probably beat him to a pulp. And so he says nothing; he lets their injustice and corruption and sinfulness continue; he allows himself to be

intimidated by them. We've been seeing this sort of thing happen in our own country. Intimidation, abuse of power, "might makes right;" good people not saying enough and not doing enough to stem the tide of lawlessness and wickedness. "The word of the Lord was rare in those days."

Young Samuel probably has no idea how bad things really are. He's serving at the temple; he was brought there by his parents at a young age; the Bible says "Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." It is very interesting to note that somebody can be serving in a temple, a temple dedicated to God, *and not know who God is*. I have seen this happen in our day as well; sometimes people come to a church, they like the music, they like the fellowship, they may (or may not!) like the preaching, *they get involved*, they start doing things to serve the church – and yet, in some cases, they may not really *know* the Lord. They may not really have a good understanding of *God's Word*. It is a huge problem, I believe; one that has led to the watering down of many churches and denominations. We have a whole mass of Christians today who don't know their Bibles very well – a whole lot of people who rely on their pastors or other Christian leaders to read the Bible for them, and tell them what it says – which can have really dangerous consequences, depending on which portions of the Bible the pastor chooses to talk about, or not talk about, or – in some instances – really distort its meaning. We also have a whole mass of Christians who also rely on other people to pray for them. They're facing a tough situation, or they've got a loved one facing a health crisis; they ask other people to pray – but do they pray themselves? There's a saying, "the problem with the church today is it's a mile wide but only an inch thick," and there's truth to that. It is imperative that the members of the church *know* the Lord. It is imperative that the Word of the Lord *be revealed*. Otherwise we end up with a church that's not grounded; it doesn't have a strong foundation; it drifts aimlessly about, following the whims of whoever happens to be in charge at the time, like a ship without a rudder. If you read church history, you'll hear many stories of times when the church was *really, really strong*, and other times when the church was *really, really weak*. Or, in some cases, downright corrupt.

So there was a massive problem in Israel in Samuel's day. "The word of the Lord was rare." There is this little temple, a last, desperate holdout in a desolate land, the one and only temple in the entire country that has been entrusted with Israel's most sacred religious object, but its head priest is nearing the end of his life; his sons, who should be his successors, are tarnishing the temple with their unholy acts; there's no one else anywhere in sight who can run the temple responsibly when Eli dies, other than young Samuel, *and he doesn't even know who God is yet!* This is a pretty desperate situation.

And so – *God* decides to do something about it. One night, Samuel is resting in temple, keeping watch over the ark of the covenant. He hears a voice: "Samuel! Samuel!" He gets up and goes running to Eli, for surely it was Eli who called him. But Eli says "No, it wasn't me; go back to sleep." So Samuel lies down again. But then he hears the voice again. "Samuel! Samuel!" He dashes back to Eli. He's probably wondering, "Is my master okay?" But Eli says, "No, I didn't call you. Go back to bed." Then the voice comes again, a third time. Poor Samuel is probably tired of getting up from his bed. He rushes into Eli's chambers. "Here I am, for you called me." Then – *finally* – Eli realizes what is going on. Samuel is not imagining this. He's not just hearing random noises or the whisper of the wind coming through the cracks in the walls. He is hearing – he is hearing – none other than the voice of *God*.

It is as if, in an instant, Eli remembers: "Oh, right. *God really does* speak to people. And he is speaking to *this young lad*." So Eli tells Samuel what Samuel should do, what *any* person should do when they realize that *God* is trying to get their attention. Eli tells Samuel to *listen*. He tells Samuel to

respond to this voice; to *talk* to this *God* who is calling him. “If he calls you, you shall say, ‘*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening!*’” It is the *proper* response. *Speak, Lord. SPEAK, Lord!* I am your servant, and I am listening to *you*, ready and willing to *hear your voice*, and *do* what you tell me to do.

The word of the Lord was rare in those days. But it wasn’t *extinct*. Even in the midst of that deep spiritual darkness that Israel was in, even in the midst of all that violence and deception and corruption, even when it probably felt to the fairly small number of *good* people that *all hope was lost*, *God still spoke*. God spoke to a heart that was *open*. God spoke to a heart that was *willing to listen*.

What God says to Samuel is that God is going to send judgment upon the house of Eli. It’s not exactly a pleasant message. God makes it clear that Eli is guilty, that Eli is complicit in his sons’ sinful acts, because *Eli knew about them, and did nothing*. God says: “I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them.”

If there is evil going on, if there are people in positions of power and responsibility who are corrupt, and if there are other people who are also in positions of power and responsibility who have the ability to *rein them in or hold them accountable or remove them from office*, they *by all means they need to be doing so*. God does not look kindly on cowards like Eli who *know* what is good and what is evil and who *allow* evil to keep happening. God *expected* Eli to act, and Eli *failed to act*, and that is *Eli’s* fault. That’s *Eli’s* responsibility. So now God holds *Eli* responsible. God is going to judge the house of Eli *not* because Eli’s sons were doing wrong – but because *Eli knew about it* – and did *nothing* to stop it.

The implications of that truth for the situation our country has been in are *enormous*.

Young Samuel hears this message from God. It is the first time he has ever heard God’s voice – and it is a voice of judgment against Samuel’s beloved master. God doesn’t tell Samuel to *do anything*. God simply reveals to him what God is going to do. And Samuel lies there on his mat, until the morning, no doubt wondering, “Oh my goodness, what in the world am I supposed to do *now?*”

When dawn comes, Eli summons Samuel to his chamber. “What was it that God told you?” he asks. “Do not hide it from me.” The Bible tells us that Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. Of course he’s afraid; I would be afraid; it is no fun telling people God’s uncomfortable truth – and God’s truth is, indeed, sometimes very, *very* uncomfortable. God’s truth sometimes hits us right where it hurts the most. Eli tells Samuel to reveal the vision; he invokes an oath that basically *commits* Samuel to tell him the truth. So Samuel tells him the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help him God. Eli, to his credit, recognizes it for the truth that it really is. He accepts God’s judgment.

In the end, what happens is this: there’s a battle between the Israelites and the Philistines. Eli’s sons bring the ark of the covenant to the battle, hoping that God’s presence upon the ark will protect Israel from defeat. But they are wrong. The Israelites lose the battle. Eli’s sons are both killed. The ark of the covenant is captured. When word reaches Eli back at the temple, he falls out of his chair and dies.

But Samuel, young Samuel – he grows up and becomes known throughout the land as a trustworthy prophet of God. God is with him. God keeps appearing to him and speaking with him. Samuel becomes, for the next generation, the person who keeps the flame of Israel’s faith alive.

God *needs* people who will keep the flame of the faith alive. God *needs* people who will *listen*.

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