

“Speak, Lord, for Your Servant Is Listening”

1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20) • Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 • 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 • John 1:43-51

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One of the joys of having so many new people in the church these past couple years is just that – it’s been a *true joy* to welcome all of you who are new into our midst. One of the challenges is that I don’t know how much you already know! We’ve got some people who haven’t been involved in a church in a very long time, and others who came from churches with different emphases and priorities. So when I write a sermon, I have to gauge how much background to give, even on passages that might be familiar to many of the rest of us, like the story of the call of Samuel that Ginnie read earlier. My general assumption is always that there’s probably at least *one* person in the congregation who has never heard this passage before, or who doesn’t know it well. That approach seems to work well, although it does mean that for people who have been around for a long time, some sermons may sound familiar!

The story about God speaking to Samuel when he was a young lad takes place approximately eleven centuries before Jesus. At this point, the Israelites had been living in the land of Canaan for a century or more, but they had not yet organized themselves into a kingdom. Periodically there were military or political leaders whom the people respected and followed, some of whom were much more faithful and ethical than others, but there was no centrally organized government. It was a somewhat chaotic time, periodically marked by armed conflicts with other nations and peoples that the Israelites had tried to displace, like the Philistines. The book of Judges even reports that there was a civil war in Israel, not long before this story takes place. The last several chapters of that book repeatedly emphasize that “there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

Additionally, as the passage tells us, “the word of the Lord was rare in those days.” Not many people heard the voice of God speaking to them. God either didn’t have much to say – or the people weren’t very good at listening. In those days, the temple in Jerusalem had not yet been built. The Israelites had set up a shrine in a city called Shiloh, 19 miles north of Jerusalem, in what is now the occupied West Bank. Initially that was where the Israelites set up the portable temple that the Israelites had constructed in the days of Moses; by the time of young Samuel, some kind of walled structure had been built to enclose the Ark of the Covenant and the various chambers that the priests used. A couple verses in the book of Judges relate that there was an annual festival to the Lord here at Shiloh.

But just because there was a sacred shrine and some priests didn’t mean that religion was thriving. The priest at Shiloh was an elderly man named Eli. He had passed a lot of responsibility for maintaining the shrine and the sacred practices to his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas – but they “were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people.” They took the best parts of the sacrifices for themselves, and they slept with the women who were servants in the temple. Eli was aware of their corruption, and reprimanded them for their behavior, but they didn’t listen to their father and continued to sin against the Lord whom they claimed to serve.

So things weren't going very well for the people of God. The two most prominent priests in the land were faithless and corrupt. The one faithful priest was quite old. "The word of the Lord was rare in those days." There were no prophets calling people back to the Lord, no voice urging repentance. There was no king to maintain and promote justice. "All the people did what was right in their own eyes."

In some ways, it feels a lot like today. How many clergy scandals have there been in the past couple decades? How greatly has the reputation of Christianity been damaged? I look around, searching for some kind of Christian leader in our country who commands the respect of many people, someone with *integrity* and *courage* and *faith* and *ethics*, like Billy Graham, Peter Marshall, Desmond Tutu, or Martin Luther King, and I don't see any! The good ones all seem to be dead ... or they've been silenced. The word of the Lord is *rare* in these days. All the people do what is right in *their* own eyes.

Into this mess came a young lad named Samuel. Samuel was the son of a man named Elkanah and a woman named Hannah. Elkanah had two wives; his other wife, Peninnah, had children, but Hannah had been barren for a long time, despite her fervent prayers and sacrifices to the Lord. Eventually, Hannah had offered this vow: "O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death." A "nazirite" was somebody whose life was especially devoted to God and who promised to adhere to certain practices. Sure enough, Hannah finally became pregnant; she gave birth to Samuel, and, after he was weaned, she brought him to the temple at Shiloh, to present him to the Lord. Eli welcomed the boy and trained him as a temple servant. Hannah had more children after that, and she visited young Samuel at the shrine from time to time.

Time passed. Eli kept getting older, so old now that he could barely see. Eli's sons continued doing all sorts of sinful things that dishonored both the Lord and the sacred shrine. Eli didn't know what could be done to make them stop. And Samuel grew up, learning the ways of the temple.

There came a night, maybe when Samuel was about twelve years old, when he was resting in the chamber in the shrine where the Ark of the Covenant was. That practice wasn't prescribed anywhere in the Jewish Law – perhaps he was there to protect the Ark from anyone who might want to do it harm. He hears a voice: "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel thinks it's Eli's voice, and goes rushing to Eli's chamber to do his master's bidding. But Eli hadn't called him. This happens a second time, and then a third. Finally Samuel realizes: that's not *Eli's* voice. That was the voice of the *Lord*. This was an utterly new phenomenon for Samuel; the narrator explains that "Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." Which is remarkable, really, and also very telling; Samuel had spent pretty much *his whole life* in the temple, and he *didn't yet know the Lord*. That should be a reminder to us all: you can spend lots and lots of time in the church, and *not know the Lord*. Spending *time* here doesn't necessarily equate to *knowing God*. Those are two very different things!

The story goes on from there. Samuel, when he perceives who it is that is calling him, says, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening," and God reveals to Samuel what God is going to do about those unfaithful sons of Eli. That's another story, and you can read on in 1 Samuel to find out what happens next. Samuel grows up to become a "trustworthy prophet of the Lord," respected throughout the entire land. He anointed Israel's first king, Saul, and also Israel's second king, David. Today, the place where Samuel is believed to be buried is a holy site respected by Jews, Christians, and Muslims; there is currently a mosque, dating to the 14th century and named in honor of Samuel, that was built on the remains of a Christian fortress that was built in the 12th century, which itself was built at the site of a Christian monastery that was built in the 6th century; and under the mosque is a crypt, which has been repurposed into a Jewish synagogue. Like so much else in the Holy Land, the history is very complex!

Let's look again at that moment when God spoke to Samuel, when Samuel *heard* God's voice. This happens from time to time. There are times, to this day, when a person hears God speaking to them, directly. Sometimes, with *words*. It happened to me, very clearly, once. Often, God speaks in more subtle ways, like a persistent nudge, that just keeps coming again and again until we get the point. Sometimes, a burst of inspiration will come that we weren't expecting. Every week, when I'm writing my sermon, I pray that burst of inspiration will come in a timely fashion, that the Spirit will give me not only the right things to talk about, but also the right words to say. Sometimes, that inspiration doesn't come when I want it to! And there are other times when it feels like God is being completely silent. When we pray, when we ask God for guidance, when we are facing an important and weighty decision, and it feels like all we get is ... nothing. That can be frustrating – come *on*, God, this is *important*, can you give me some *clarity* here? – but perhaps that silence means that sometimes, God trusts us to make that decision on our own, with the information and the resources that we already have on hand. The point is, there are times when God actively *communicates* to us, in direct or not-so-direct ways, and we need to be ready and prepared to listen. That listening will be easier if we know how God has spoken to our ancestors in the faith, which means we need a working understanding of these sacred stories.

Sometimes, God calls us to *do* something, to take some kind of concrete *action*. This is what happened to the disciples of Jesus when he called them to follow them. When Jesus said to Philip, "Follow me," and Philip followed. When Nathanael asked Jesus, "Where did you get to know me?" and Jesus's answer was so clear and compelling that Nathanael quickly and eagerly decided to follow him too. The voice and the words of Jesus was so persuasive, so convincing, so authentic, that Philip and Andrew couldn't *help* but follow. Was it because Jesus was particularly charismatic? Perhaps that was a piece of it, but charisma alone does not mean that someone is worth trusting and following. There have been plenty of church leaders blessed with the gift of charisma who turned out not to be worth trusting and following *at all*. It's true in other professions as well: teachers, doctors, politicians – just because someone has charisma doesn't mean they're trustworthy. But there was something uniquely special about Jesus. There are no records *anywhere*, in *any* piece of literature from that time period, Christian or non-Christian, suggesting that Jesus had anything other than a heart that was *wholly good*. His opponents objected to his teachings, his healings on the Sabbath, and ultimately his claim that he was the Messiah, but they expressed *no* concerns about his moral character. This was a man who truly *was* worth following. Philip and Nathanael *sensed* that, long before his name was known, before he had performed any miracles or taught anybody about God. So when he called them, *they came*.

God continues to speak, to invite, to beckon, to call. Every year, here in our church, God calls some people to particular positions of leadership. We have a Nominating Committee, a group of *humans* who look around and consider people whom God might be calling; but *something happens* when people receive that phone call that either leads them to say either "yes" or "no." Hopefully, they are listening for the voice of *God*, speaking in subtle or not-so-subtle ways. Hopefully, they're not just listening to the voice of their own ego, trying to puff themselves up – for the best church leaders know how to set their ego at the door. They realize that their service to the church isn't about *them*. They don't say "yes" because they want prestige or acclaim; they don't say "yes" because they want to feel good about themselves; rather, they say "yes" because they want to *serve*. Like young Samuel. God called, and Samuel was ready and willing to *listen*. "Speak, Lord," he said, "for your servant is *listening*."

So let us turn now to the task of *recognizing* the call to serve that God has given to some of our members. God has called; they have listened. Let us ordain and install our new Elders and Deacons.

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