

June 3, 2018

Title: Speak, Your Servant is Listening

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Mark 2:23-4:6

Hannah, a woman who desperately wanted a child, cried out her prayer to God in the temple. When her child was born, she named him Samuel which means, "God hears." As part of her vow to God, Samuel was dedicated to God's service and was living in the temple with the priest Eli when today's scripture reading took place. Samuel, whose name means, "God hears" became the one who would hear, who would respond to God saying, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

He was still a boy when he heard a voice calling him in the night. Samuel assumed that it was the priest Eli calling and he went to Eli saying, "Here I am". Even though he was living in the temple with Eli, Samuel had no idea that it was God calling him. This happened three times before Eli realized what was happening and instructed Samuel in how to respond. It is still true today that we generally hear what we expect to hear, and it can be hard to hear other voices unless someone helps us.

It was a time of "spiritual desolation, religious corruption, personal immorality, political danger and social upheaval."ⁱ Sound familiar? The Scripture tells us that the word of the Lord was not heard often in this time. "Down through the ages, God has raised up prophets in desperate times; men and women who seem to suddenly appear out of nowhere, yet who seem to have been called for a particular time and place."ⁱⁱ As he grew Samuel would play a pivotal role in the rise of the monarchy in ancient Israel. We'll hear a little more about his role next week, but for today, we

focus on his response, “Speak, your servant is listening.” Samuel became a prominent prophet in Jewish history because he never trusted in his own wisdom, but always remembered to turn to God. “Speak, your servant is listening.”

As we have seen frequently in the Bible, when God needs someone, typically God does not reach out to the person we would think to be the most likely. God reaches out to a child, a young woman, fishermen, tax collectors, sinners, the people society would consider having the least influence, power and resources. This is something for which I am always grateful, because it means that God reaches out to people like you and me, and then empowers us to do what God has called us to do.

Sometimes we may not recognize that it is God calling to us. Sometimes we need someone else to help us hear and identify God’s word to us. One of the best ways that I know of to help us be open to hearing God, is to begin each day with a prayer that says, “Speak, your servant is listening.” When we begin each day opening ourselves to what God has for us that day, we are opening ourselves to amazing possibilities and an exciting perspective on life. We may also be opening ourselves to some risks and actions that we had not anticipated.

Beginning each day by opening ourselves to God, is to my understanding, part of what Sabbath is about in Scripture. In today’s Gospel we heard Jesus and his disciples being challenged for not observing the Sabbath in the way that the Pharisees and most people believed the sabbath was to be observed.

By Jesus’ time, there were many rules or laws about how to observe the sabbath – and that included no work at all. Jesus’ disciples have violated that by plucking some heads of grain as they walked through a

field on the sabbath. This would be considered work. There were rules about how far someone could walk on the sabbath – building a fire was not permitted, cooking was not allowed, anything that could be considered work. Jesus responded by asserting that the “sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Sabbath is really God’s gift to humanity. It is a reminder that we need to be intentional about setting aside time to be with God, to rest, to focus on God and not on the demands of our daily lives. Later in the Gospel, when a man with a withered hand shows up in the synagogue, the Pharisees watched to see if Jesus would heal the man. Jesus’ question to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” was met with silence. When Jesus told the man to stretch out his hand, he did so, and his hand was healed.

It can be hard for us to really understand the feelings of the Pharisees and why they were so upset about what Jesus and his disciples were doing. Jesus’ words and actions were often a counterpoint to religious rules and regulations. In our culture, it is much easier for us to look at the sabbath in much less restrictive and less emotional ways than it was in Jesus’ day.

I said earlier that saying to God, “Speak, your servant is listening” can be risky. As I was reading the commentaries this week and thinking about how to explain this, I felt that God was giving me a couple of examples that I really didn’t want to use, but that faithfulness requires me to use.

Thinking about the disciples being hungry and plucking a few heads of grain to feed their hunger; thinking about Jesus healing a man’s hand on the sabbath so that he did not have to spend even one more day with a deformed hand, thinking about how Jesus challenged the common and

rigid understanding of the sabbath, and put what he believed and knew about God's love ahead of the laws for Sabbath observance, I thought about the NFL players who have decided to kneel during the national anthem. It was easy for the Pharisees to accuse Jesus of not showing respect for Torah or for religious leaders. Likewise, many people believe that NFL players who kneel during the anthem are being disrespectful to those who have fought to protect our country.

Colin Kaepernick first sat during the anthem at a 2016 pregame to draw attention to police brutality and the racial injustice that still exists in our nation. Nate Boyer a former Army Green Beret and NFL long snapper was offended and wrote an open letter to him. Later the two sat down to talk. They agreed that kneeling would be a way to present Kaepernick's message without disrespecting the armed forces or the flag.

The Pharisees felt so passionately about what Jesus was doing that they immediately began to plot about how to destroy him. Kaepernick's protest has escalated to the point where some believe that those who kneel are not only disrespecting the military but also being unamerican and last week Donald Trump suggested to Fox News that players who refuse to stand for the National Anthem shouldn't even be in the country.

Nate Boyer's response to the escalation of this protest and counter protests was another letter urging people to find ways to talk. He wrote, "I believe that progress and real change happens in this world when you reach across the divide, you build a bridge, you swallow your pride, you open your mind..." He continued, "One great thing about freedom is that you get to choose everyday how you treat your neighbor. This IS the best country in the world, but we can always do better."

Isn't that true in almost all things, "We can always do better." One of my favorite patriotic songs is "America the Beautiful" and especially the third verse that concludes with these words reminding us that as much as we may love our country it is never perfect, "God mend thine every flaw, confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law." We **can** always do better not only in our country but also in our communal and individual lives as faithful Christians.

"Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." In times when prophetic voices challenge the things we value, may we first pray, "Help us, O God, to listen first to you."

Mark tells us that the Pharisees went out and immediately conspired about how to destroy Jesus. It is ironic, isn't it, that their actions really did more to desecrate the sabbath than any of the actions for which Jesus and his disciples were being chastised. I believe that in their passion they were in danger of making the Sabbath more important than being faithful to God.

Sadly, I also believe that some responses in the conflict around the National Anthem do more to violate what our Country stands for than what was ever intended by the initial protests. As Christians who love the country in which we live, we also must be careful not to put our National Anthem or the country for which it stands above our first calling as Christians to faithfully continue to pray, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Only then can we begin to really understand each other and not only hear but understand the words, concerns, and passions of those who view things differently than we do.

Where is God calling us to listen in new ways, to hear voices that we have not previously recognized, voices that may be speaking to us about the will of God?

God is not confined to our rules about God, or to our way of perceiving God. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was always reconfiguring our relationship with God, not only as individuals, but in the structures of society as well. Such a reconfiguration is very threatening.^{iv}

The United Methodist Church continues to be in the midst of an ongoing struggle to hear God's voice above all others as we prepare for a special session of General Conference in February 2019. Delegates from all over the world will hear the report from the Council of Bishops recommending adoption of what is being called the "One Church" plan. This is the result of a long study and deliberation of The Commission on a Way Forward formed in 2016.

Like most other churches or denominations, the church has struggled with full inclusion and ordination for LGBTQ individuals and whether our pastors and churches can celebrate same sex marriages. The "One Church" model would remove all restrictive language from the Book of Discipline and allow local conferences and churches to make their own decisions. I'm happy to discuss all of this with anyone who is interested, but my point in mentioning it today is that it also illustrates the need for us to pray, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

We are a global church and members from all over the world have struggled with how to be faithful Christians as we seek to hear God's voice. We have argued fiercely at meetings, and sadly, accused people on the opposite side of not listening to God. It can be hard to accept that people with whom we disagree are also faithful Christians doing their very best to listen to God.

There has been much talk about schism and whether or not people will stay with the church if the decision goes contrary to what they believe is

the only right decision. The Council of Bishops has asked all of us to be in prayer for the upcoming General Conference. It has been suggested that we set our alarms to pray from 2:23 to 2:26 pm daily – these times representing the dates of the upcoming conference – Feb 23 – Feb 26. Once again, the ongoing challenge for us is to keep God first, rather than the institutional church, and to listen for God’s word for us today.

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Where is God calling us to listen in new ways, to hear voices that we have not previously recognized, voices that may be speaking to us about the will of God?

Don E. Saliers, one of the commentators I read this week, writing about the passage in Mark’s gospel, observed that “Good people in the name of God are capable of opposing the very good Jesus brings. In every generation there have been human attempts to invoke the name of God – on programs and policies that end up subverting the love and grace shown in Christ. ... Christ’s authority is greater than any human voice, no matter how pious, no matter how deeply entrenched in religious tradition.”^v

What field is Jesus walking through in our lives, plucking ears of corn from our sacred rituals? What are the essential categories of our lives that Jesus threatens? What have we made divine in our lives that should remain mortal and finite?^{vi}

We all hope that we are like Samuel, ready to respond, “Speak, your servant is listening.” “And maybe most of the time we are. Still, we all know how we, too, can become quickly resistant the moment we sense God’s word is challenging us or some longstanding practice in our lives or some deeply entrenched belief. It is an ongoing challenge in the Christian

life to say again and again with Samuel, ‘Speak. Your servant is listening.’”^{vii}

ⁱ Keeping Holy Time, Year B, p.64

ⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, p.79

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 2:27 NRSV

^{iv} Homiletical Perspective: Feasting on the Word. P. 95

^v Saliers, Don E. Pastoral Perspective in Feasting on the Word, p.96

^{vi} Homiletical Perspective

^{vii} Abingdon Preaching Annual 2018, p.78