

ARE YOU LISTENING?

1 Samuel 3:1-20

January 17, 2021

Have you ever heard someone say, “God spoke to me today…” and wondered how they could be so confident that it was actually God speaking to them? Have you ever wondered what God’s voice really sounds like? Do you think you would know it if you heard it? Throughout the Scriptures, we frequently read about people hearing God’s voice, and Lynne has already shared with us one such instance from the Old Testament.

Before we focus on today’s scripture about Samuel and Eli, let me give you a little context for our story. Why was Samuel living in the temple with Eli, the priest, and not with his own mother? We don’t know Samuel’s exact age, only that he was a young boy. Samuel’s mother Hannah was thought to be barren, and she begged God for a child. In her prayer, she promised God that if she became pregnant, she would give that child over to the service of God. Now that might seem a little odd to us today, but it was common in those times—an affirmation that children do not belong to their parents, but are given to them by God.

Our scripture for today begins: “The word of the Lord was rare in those days, there were not many visions”. Samuel is living in a precarious time. You see, God was angry with Israel and so He was essentially giving them the silent treatment. God would send the people a judge to correct their ways, and those people would comply for a little while, only to eventually fall back into doing whatever they wanted to. They were essentially ignoring all that God had set before them, and taking matters into their own hands instead.

Now we know that Eli and Samuel were resting in separate rooms of the temple when Samuel heard a voice calling his name. Because Samuel was so young, and he didn’t know the word of the Lord yet, he assumes that it is Eli and immediately runs to him and wakes him up-- not once but three times-- saying “Here I am; you called me!” And Eli just sends him back to bed three times over.

We might wonder here why Eli the priest doesn’t immediately recognize what is happening. We do know that Eli is getting older and that his eyesight is failing him, so perhaps he is just plain exhausted!

But when Eli finally does catch on and realizes that the Lord is calling Samuel, he instructs the boy on what to say if this happens again. He tells Samuel: “Go and lie down, and if he calls you again, say [to him]: Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

And sure enough, when God calls Samuel for the fourth time, he responds just as Eli told him to. And God's message to Samuel was about the coming judgment on Eli and his family.

So what did Eli do that was so bad that he had incurred God's wrath in the first place? Well, here let me add a bit more context. Eli's adult sons were blatant sinners and God had warned Eli about their wicked behavior. But Eli had taken no action against his sons other than to pass on weak warnings that they were in danger of provoking God. As the high priest, Eli should not have honored his sons above the Lord, but he lacked the courage and backbone to force his sons to change their lifestyle. And God had had enough!

Now getting back to Samuel's conversation with God, perhaps Samuel was wishing that he had just kept on sleeping and not heard God's message to him. After all, God was talking about his beloved mentor Eli, and God was now about to punish both Eli and his sons!

So Samuel lay there until morning. He lay there not wanting to tell Eli this message from God. And he was afraid. Remember that Samuel was only a boy, and this was a pretty heavy message for a young boy to deliver to an aging priest. But he also knew that he could not remain silent even if he wanted to. He needed to tell Eli the truth.

When Eli asked Samuel what God had told him, Samuel could have skipped over some important details and watered down God's message to Eli. But Eli asked Samuel to tell him the truth and hide nothing. So Samuel faithfully tells him everything that God told him leaving nothing out. And then, Eli humbly receives God's word, saying "He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes."

After Samuel showed himself faithful as a prophet to Eli, God made him a prophet to all of Israel. Now remember that our scripture reading began by saying that God's word was rare at that time. Well, it ends on a much brighter note because through Samuel, God's word was once again heard throughout all of Israel.

Today's scripture brings to my mind the commercials where the Verizon guy with the glasses and the short black hair walks around checking the strength of the signal on his cell phone. He keeps asking the question: "Can you hear me now? Good!" Obviously, the point of the commercial is to emphasize how good Verizon's signal strength is when it comes to cell phones.

Well, here's a question for you. How good is your own signal strength when it comes to hearing from God? Do you have an open line of communication with God or are there some dead spots?

Every morning before I pray, I read a daily devotional recommended to me by a friend which is entitled *Jesus Calling* by the author Sarah Young. As she notes in her introduction, “It is written from the perspective of Jesus speaking [in order] to help readers feel more personally connected with Him. So the first person singular “I” ... always refers to Christ and “you” refers to you, the reader.” [1]

Let me just read you one little excerpt so that you can get an idea of why this devotional really speaks to me. And I quote: “Let me prepare you for this day that stretches out before you. I know exactly what this day will contain, whereas you have only vague ideas about it. You would like to see a map, showing all the twists and turns of your journey. I will not show you what is on the road ahead, but I will thoroughly equip you for the journey.” [2]

We sometimes think that it would be wonderful if God were to give us the big picture, and if we could know the end of a thing from the beginning of it, but that’s just not what we get from God. We get a call to live by faith and to strike out into an unknown future. Trusting that God will give us the light we need for each step along the way.

Now getting back to little Samuel, he kept listening to God’s message even though that message was unpleasant to hear and even though what God was calling him to do wasn’t easy. It might have seemed prudent for Samuel to modify God’s message to avoid offending or angering Eli. But through his Word, God gave Samuel the faith to not only listen but to boldly obey.

It has been my experience that sometime God’s call is so subtle that we don’t recognize it or at least not at first. Other times, God’s call is like being wacked in the head with a two-by-four and we may not recognize it even then!

I am reminded of a story about a man who was stuck on his rooftop in a flood and he was praying to God for help. Soon someone in a rowboat came by and offered to rescue him. The stranded fellow shouted back: “No, it’s OK. I am praying to God and he is going to save me.” Next a man in a motorboat came by with the same offer and again was told “No thank-you”. Finally a helicopter flew by and the pilot offered to toss him down a rope. And the man on the roof once again refused the offer of help. “I know that God is going to save me”, he said, “because I have faith.” Soon the water rose above the rooftop and the man drowned. When he got to Heaven he decided to have a few words with God. “I had faith in you, but you didn’t save me, you let me drown. I don’t understand why!” To this God replied, “I sent you a rowboat and a motorboat and a helicopter, what more could you possibly expect from me?”

God’s call is a powerful thing. It begins by listening, but isn’t fully complete until we respond with our actions. As I think about God’s call coming to each of us in the midst of our daily lives, I think that there are many times when we respond with: “You want me to do what?” Fear, reluctance, and resistance are all normal whether the call from God is

for a large, daunting task, or a small, simple challenge. We think that we are too old, or too young, or not smart enough, or too busy... and the excuses go on and on. I know this for a fact because I have been there more times than I would like to admit. I am just not a person who jumps into a pool with both feet before testing the water temperature! Yet God keeps yanking me out of my comfort zone on a regular basis, and I have to keep reminding myself that He not only calls us to serve, but also equips us with the gifts we need in any given situation.

In her book, *Amazed and Confused* the author Heather Zemple writes: “Faith does not mean God meets our expectations. [But rather] it means we cling to God’s character, knowing that God will always accomplish His purposes. God wants to forge in us a faith that is far greater than our circumstances. Faith means knowing God can, believing God will, but clinging to Him even if he doesn’t. Faith is not an assurance that everything is going to be OK; it is the assurance that God is in control. That’s the only way to live, knowing that some pains and confusion of life will remain mysteries even to our graves.” [3]

Less than a month ago I retired from a career that spanned just over 43 years, and one that I truly loved. On the one hand I am excited about no more early alarms, no more meetings, no more deadlines, and no more office politics. On the other hand, however, there is the anxiety of not knowing what is to come next. Several people have asked me what I plan to do in my retirement and have even offered me some helpful suggestions. But the truth of the matter is that I just don’t know yet. However, I am confident that God knows what the next chapter will look like for me. So every day I pray for the patience and discernment to know His call, and the courage to follow where He leads me. As the words of an old hymn which may be familiar to you remind me: “What he says, we will do. Where he sends we will go; never fear, only trust and obey.”

The call story of Samuel gives us a rich understanding of how God’s call comes. And the reminder that our God is persistent with it, even if it takes three or more times to get the message across. Samuel also reminds us that God’s call extends to everyone. Answering God’s call is the work of the community, old and young together. And it all starts with the courage that a young boy and an old priest have to wake up and pay attention. May it be so with us.

[1] *Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence*, Sarah Young, Nashville, 2004.

[2] Ibid.

[3] *Amazed and Confused: When God’s Actions Collide with our Expectations*, Heather Zemple, Nashville, 2014.