

Samuel Listens to God

1 Samuel 3:1-11

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3 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. ⁴Then the LORD called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' and he said, 'Here I am!' ⁵and ran to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call; lie down again.' So he went and lay down. ⁶The LORD called again, 'Samuel!' Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call, my son; lie down again.' ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."' So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.' ¹¹Then the LORD said to Samuel, 'See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.'

Just before I left for college, my youth minister passed along some sage advice. He said, "If you want to have a social life in college, get an answering machine." It turns out he was right. Since this was in the days before cell phones were widespread, I didn't have a phone with me all the time or a way for people to get a hold of me when I wasn't in my dorm room. Therefore, Rick's advice proved to be true. If I wanted to connect with friends and make plans, an answering machine was a lifesaver.

I thought that the answering machine would be most transformational technology when it came to social interaction during my college years. It turns out, it became

something else. My senior year, one of my roommates came back from Christmas break with a new phone for our apartment. This phone – the first one I ever saw like this – had Caller ID capability. We became some of the first people to have this new technology. And, it was so much fun to answer the phone with the knowledge of who was on the other end. “Hey Randi!” “Hi Courtney!” And their question was always, “How did you know it was me?” No one seemed to believe that I just had keen intuition.

Today, Caller ID is ubiquitous – that’s the fancy term that means existing everywhere. Maybe you still have a landline phone that doesn’t have Caller ID, but if you have a cell phone, it’s a standard feature. However, I am convinced that as much as the answering machine supported social interaction, Caller ID does the opposite.

It used to be – before caller ID – that when the phone rang, you answered it. Now, when the phone rings, you are left with three choices. You can choose “Answer” and speak to the caller or choose “Decline” and let it go to voicemail. The third choice is not to do either, and to simply ignore the ring, hoping it will just go away.

If I don’t know the number, I don’t tend to answer (at least when it is a number outside the 940 area code). Most of you do the same. With this little bit of technology, we now wield control over who we talk to. Telemarketer? Nope...Decline! Best Friend? Sure, I’ll answer. Mother-in-Law? Let it go to voicemail. And this has all sorts of implications for our ability to talk, listen, and be in relationship with others.

The fact is, we like the power these tools give us. Thanks to Caller ID, we can choose which calls we answer. Thanks to cable, satellite, and streaming services, we can choose which of the 250 channels on our televisions we want to watch and which ones we want to skip. Thanks to the breadth of information on the internet, we can choose articles that interest us or that solve our problems, and surf past those things

that might upset us or bore us. With all of these choices comes the power and ability to control our interactions.

However, the problem with all that choice is that we choose to only hear what we want to hear. For example, some of us will only get our news from Fox News while others of us will singularly turn to MSNBC for our headlines. Some of us will only read books or attend lectures that confirm our beliefs and discredit opposing viewpoints. Some of us will unfriend, unfollow, or scroll past people in our social media feeds whose views are different than our own. And this kind of thinking can also creep into the church, where the only “good ideas” for advancing the future of the church come from people of our own age and experience.

It’s really easy to get in echo chambers where all we hear is that which suits our ears. And because it suits our ears, it serves to amplify and reinforce our own beliefs. When we only hear the information that we want to hear or that we completely agree with, we narrow our ability to see or listen to another perspective. And in the end, we create cultural tribes of people just like us – who talk, act, and think about what benefits us most. Kind of like the Israelites around the year 1100 BC.

This is the second week of our worship series, *Call Me Maybe?*, in which we are looking at stories of God’s call to individuals in the Bible. Last week, we looked at the promising future God called Abraham into. From his story, we noted that God’s call gives us an identity as people of God.

This morning, we fast-forward about 900 years from last week’s story. In those 900 years, the story of the descendants of Abraham has moved from Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, to Moses and Joshua. And after Joshua, the Israelites are led by a series of judges who rise up in difficult times. Repeatedly, though, despite the efforts of these judges, the Israelites find themselves in a progressively downward spiral. By the end of the book of Judges, tribal wars threatened to tear the people apart. As the last verse of

Judges proclaims, “the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25). In other words, all of these tribes of Israel were in their own echo chambers. It is into this chaos that the key figure of our scripture lesson this morning, Samuel, is born.

Samuel was the son of Elkanah and his wife, Hannah. Like Sarah before her and Elizabeth after her, Hannah had been childless. With a broken heart, Hannah prayed and pleaded with God for a child, promising to give him in service to the Lord if God would bless her in this way. The first chapter of 1 Samuel tells us that God remembered Hannah and, in time, she gave birth to a son that she named Samuel. True to her word, once the boy was weaned, she presented him to Eli, the priest at Shiloh, to serve with him.

Now Eli had been a good priest, but his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were not. They were scoundrels, more interested in greed and women than in the finer points of the priestly craft. In particular, they chose their share of the sacrifices first, taking the best and giving God the rest. The people were coming to worship God, but Hophni and Phinehas were doing what was right in their own eyes.

Hebrew tradition tells us that Samuel was 12 years old when the events of our scripture lesson unfolded. He was old enough to have matured under Eli, but not old enough to have been exposed to everything. Verse 1 tells us that the word of the Lord was rare during that time. Was it that God had stopped speaking? Was God withholding his word from the people of Israel as a consequence for their unfaithfulness – for the sins of people like Hophni and Phinehas? Or...was the word of the Lord rare because the people were declining to listen?

In a day in which the “word of the Lord” is rare and “visions” were uncommon in Israel, what then happens to Samuel is unusual. Both of these phrases do not occur anywhere else in the entire Hebrew Bible. Yet, Samuel’s call was both to listen and to see what God would do.

As we heard a few moments ago, when the word of God first came to Samuel, he didn't understand it for what it was. Resting in the temple at Shiloh right next to the Ark of the Covenant, three times Samuel was awakened by a voice. Samuel thought it was the voice of his old mentor, Eli, but it was God who had called out to him. Finally, old Eli himself suggested to Samuel that maybe what he was hearing was the voice of God. So, when Samuel heard the voice calling out to him again, he responded, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." Finally, Samuel was not only able to hear God, he was ready to listen to what God had to say.

Most of us know where Samuel ended up. He was a prophet – a divinely appointed leader, capable of functioning as a priest, seer, war leader, and judge. He led the tribes to military victories, challenged the people with God's word, and was called upon to anoint the first kings of Israel. As such, he stood in the gap between the tribal confederacies found in the book of Judges and the Israelite monarchy we associate with David and Solomon.

This reality highlights an important point. God's call did not come to Samuel – nor does it come to us – in general circumstances. This is not a narrative of Samuel's general religious awakening. It is not simply another experience on the road to spiritual maturity. Samuel is specifically called by God in a time of spiritual desolation, religious corruption, political danger, and social upheaval.¹ Samuel's call was to a prophetic task. And we miss the point if we just make this story about the experience of the call itself.

When God calls, God is always about to do something. That's what is meant by the phrase it "will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle." It's a metaphor that portends a very serious divine action. It might not be tomorrow, it might not be this year, but something is coming. And when God calls us, God calls with purpose. And, most likely, it will involve spiritual challenges and social transformations. In other

words, when God calls us, it's not just to give us a one-time mountaintop experience with God. It's a call to do something.

It's here that we have to pause and answer the question that is on all of our minds. How? How do we know when God is calling, especially in the midst of the noise and clutter of our lives? It's one thing to expect God to speak when we are sleeping beside the Ark of the Covenant. But today, when commercials and print ads and billboards and spam in our inboxes and telemarketers and our bosses and our spouses and our children all compete for our attention, how do we hear the still small voice of God? Fortunately, the story of Samuel also gives us a helpful key for determining whether we are really receiving a call from God.

The first key to determining if God is calling arises from the fact that, in Samuel's case, Eli discerned the divine presence first. In the same way, we need to be open to seeking the advice and wisdom of others who might aid us in discerning God's call. Who are you talking too about what you think God might be asking you to do? Do you have a trusted friend or mentor who can help you process what you perceive God to be asking of you with wise spiritual counsel?

A second key to discerning whether God is calling is to realize that we may not like what we hear. In a time where, in most of our lives, we can avoid what we don't want to hear by changing the channel or navigating to another site, we have to own up to the fact that, sometimes, God's call asks of us difficult choices. We can choose to hit decline, but we do so at our own spiritual peril. Now, this doesn't mean that God will only call us to do things we aren't sure we want to do. It just means we need to be sensitive to those prompts – to pay extra attention to those whispers of the Spirit that are challenging us to move beyond what is known and comfortable.

Finally, the third key is to recognize that the divine word is often mediated through human words.ⁱⁱ This is the “what happened next” lesson of Samuel's story. Having

received and perceived the call of God, Samuel then became the voice of God for others. In the years that followed God's call, Samuel allowed the word of God to flow through him to others. The Israelites heard God's call to faithfulness and action through the words God placed upon Samuel's heart to share with them.

We like to think that when God calls us, it is going to be a Damascus Road experience. We think we will be knocked off our feet, illuminated with a blinding light, and will hear a booming voice that sounds a lot like James Earl Jones giving us a clear direction. That's always possible, but leave open the possibility that what God may be calling you to do may be voiced through other people - from an off-hand comment by a friend that convicts you; by a news story that disturbs and breaks your heart; or by a challenge made to you by someone right here at church.

There's a metaphor from construction that I believe can help us excel in both this God-awareness and self-awareness. About 20 years ago, when Jodi's dad retired, they decided to build their dream house. I remember walking through the house with him as it was under construction, just before the drywall was hung. One of the things he pointed out to me was that each room had an empty PVC pipe that ran from the attic down through the walls of each room to a switchbox that would be then be covered by a blank switch plate. In his wisdom, he had added a conduit into each room for future technology. He didn't know what he might one day need or what technologies might arise someday, but he had intentionally created channels – conduits – for these future cords and cables.

That's the mindset I think we have to have in order to prepare for God's call in our lives. When we finally perceived that it was God who was speaking to him, Samuel became a conduit of the Lord's Word – a channel through which the Lord spoke to the Israelites. In the same way, we also need to become conduits - channels through which the power of God can move; through which God can speak.

For some of us, being a conduit is to allow for God to move in the future. We are leaving ourselves open to the possibility that God has a task and a direction for us that has not yet been revealed. For others of us, being a conduit involves speaking and mediating God's word to those in our orbits. Perhaps it is being a conduit of wisdom to your children or grandchildren, sharing your faith through intentional investment in them or strengthening their faith by enabling their involvement at church each week. Perhaps it is being a conduit of grace to people who have just lost a loved one, speaking a word of the hope and peace we have in Jesus Christ. Perhaps it is being a conduit of compassion and justice, working to solve the human hopes and hurts that keep you awake at night, speaking up where you have previously been silent. Whatever it might be, the fact is, we need to reserve room for God to speak in us and to us and through us.

The word that God gave to Samuel in the Temple at Shiloh revealed the next phase of God's activity.ⁱⁱⁱ And, the word that God speaks to each of us does the same. It reveals where God is moving and will continue to move in each of our lives. It reveals where God is challenging us spiritually and transforming our lives and the lives of those around us in a God-shaped way. All we have to do is listen. And if we do, just imagine what would happen in our families and our church and our community if we press answer rather than decline when God calls.

Speak Lord...your servants are listening.

ⁱ Birch, Bruce C. "The First and Second Books of Samuel" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. II*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nam, Roger. "Commentary on 1 Samuel 3:1-10" in *Working Preacher*. January 18, 2015.

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2305