

## Listening to God

### 1 Samuel 3: 1-10

Who was Samuel? As one of the pivotal characters of the Hebrew Bible, he was the last of the Judges of Israel and the first of the prophets. What did he do? As a prophet, he anointed Saul as the first king of Israel. He later withdrew favor from Saul and anointed David to be the king.

Before all this, Samuel was a child of blessing. His mother Hannah had no children and she was very sad. When she and her husband went to the holy place Shiloh, before the days of the Temple in Jerusalem, she did nothing but pray to have a child. Her prayer was so emotional that the priest Eli thought she was drunk. She was not drunk, however, just miserable. So, Eli blessed her saying, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.”

Hannah left Shiloh much happier than when she came. Soon, she became pregnant and when her son Samuel was born, she dedicated him to God and brought him to live at the holy shrine of Shiloh with the priest Eli, to serve the Lord there. Then, Hannah went home and had more children.

Eli, the priest, also had three sons, but they were very evil. Samuel, in contrast, was very good. He is described in words quite similar to those used in Luke’s gospel to describe another boy many centuries later: Samuel “continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people” (1Sam. 2: 26)

In the setting for today’s scripture passage, Samuel is still quite young – a boy. Eli, though, is growing old and nearly blind. One evening, while Samuel sleeps in the tabernacle (sleeping in the church!), he is startled by a voice calling his name: “Samuel! Samuel!” Sure that it was Eli, Samuel goes to the priest to see what he wants. It turns out to be a false alarm, so the boy returns to bed. The same thing happens again and then a third time.

Finally, Eli caught on. “God is calling you. When you hear the voice, you say, ‘Speak. I’m your servant, ready to listen.’” Sure enough, the fourth time is the charm. As a result, Samuel learned what he didn’t want to know. He learned of the demise of Eli’s family because of his evil sons. In the morning, Samuel told what he had learned to Eli who, sadly, recognized the truth. So, Eli’s family was wiped out and Samuel went on to hear and follow God’s voice the rest of his life.

Have you ever heard voices? Have you ever been aware of receiving a message apparently from outside yourself, yet not from any particular person, without anybody in the vicinity? If so, what did you do with that? If not, how do you discern God’s presence and leadership?

The boy Samuel heard God speaking, but it took the priest Eli to help him understand what he was hearing. Christian living, what we often call discipleship, often begins with hearing a “voice” and seeking to discern what we are hearing. This is the first in a six-part series of sermons examining the *Nuts and Bolts of Christian Living*. The topics will be:

- “Listening to God”
- “Following Christ”
- “Finding Your Voice”
- “Freedom”
- “Discipline”
- “Experiencing the Numinous”

If you don't know what "the numinous" is, you really don't want to miss that Sunday, February 26<sup>th</sup>! It will be the first Sunday to worship together in our own Church House.

The Christian journey begins with listening to God. Some people who hear "the voice" may become aware of God's presence when they're not even seeking it. Surprise! Others work hard at listening and searching, longing to hear God. Listening is the first big step on the journey of discipleship.

What's the Word for Crossroads Church? What are we hearing when we as a congregation listen to God? I remember the first Word I heard in relation to this congregation, before I ever knew you. It was the word of my own need for a job. You were looking for a pastor and I was looking for a church and we found each other.

Since being here, I have continued to listen to God speaking to me through you. I must admit that discerning the message sometimes gets confusing. You speak with lots of different voices, saying many different things. Some of the voices I counted on when I first came are no longer here. They have left. Some voices I didn't hear at first and they now sound loud and clear. In many ways, when I listen to you I find I am listening to God.

Four years ago, when I became your pastor, the big issues were our congregation's relationship with Broadway Baptist and also the issue of finding a place to house this congregation. We were faced with learning different ways to be church and to be a pastor.

Over these years, listening has involved learning to let go of how I thought things would be – letting go of the idea of having plenty of money. We have been learning to trust God's presence and the movement of the Spirit through this body. You and I are continuing to learn to embrace the precious gifts that are here and that we discover together in this congregation.

There are amazing gifts we find on display. They have led us to our Guatemala project, our Neighborhood partnership, our ministry of mission trips, our musical theater ministry, our theological journeying, our commitment to being community, our commitment to relationship, to health, and to spiritual growth, and our desire to share our life with others -- to grow in numbers.

Last year, we not only continued those things we do, we also took the time to look at ourselves honestly and commit ourselves by pledging and then giving a lot of money! Now, our building is purchased and we are getting ready to move in. We've got dreams for this congregation. I've got dreams and plans. But I believe God's possibilities make my plans seem puny. And the dreams we have for ourselves may not be half large enough.

We have an exciting future. We have an exciting present. God is using us, and will use us, in powerful ways in this community and in the worldwide Church, as long as we continue to be ourselves, listen to God, and respond.

What's the Word for us as individual people, as travelers on the Christ road together? The whole secret of how faithful we will be as a church is revealed by how faithful we will be as individuals – how we hear the voice, discern our direction, and act on God's call.

In the end, you and I respond to the movement of God in our lives in one of two ways. One, I ask the question "Why?" as an accusatory statement that challenges God to meet my expectations. This way allows me to remain safely, if precariously, unchanged – exactly where I am. This is the response of not listening to God, but rather to the fear that lives within us.

The other response is to ask the question "Why?" as a genuine question, seeking to know who God is and who I am. This response invites God to reveal more of the divine nature to my understanding and challenges me to grow where I've never grown before.

Start with listening, and not just to any sound. Listen to the voice of God, the presence of the divine Spirit. This voice is not saying just anything. This is the voice with your name in it. Beginning to listen to this voice leads you to your true vocation. Gordon Cosby wrote:

“Vocation ... has the element of knowing that if you respond to the call, you are faithful to your own inner being, and you are enhanced by it. Your own awareness converges with some need out yonder and intersects with it in such a way that you have the sense that you were born to this.”

(from *Handbook for Mission Groups*)

The Christian life begins with listening and moves to action. As the German poet Goethe challenges us, “Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it; boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.” We are a congregation seven years into living the dream. Five weeks from now, we will be in our own church house.

And you, each one of you, wherever you are on your journey, it is time to listen anew to God. When I was a child, living in New York City, some nights I used to try to tune in and listen to a late night Yankees’ game. There was generally lots of static and only a faint voice at first. Then, the signal would gradually grow stronger and the words more understandable. Listening to God is sometimes like that. It takes patience, perseverance, and passion to receive God’s signal. Know this and count on it: God is speaking to you today.