

Ears to Hear

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
January 14, 2018
2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
1 Samuel 3:1-20



This is a familiar story for many. When I learned this was the scripture text for today, I immediately remembered leading chapel this fall for our preschool right here on these steps. I read them a book that focuses on Samuel, and how he heard the Lord call him.

I have always tried to place myself in this story as Samuel, to think about times when God has been calling me, but when I wasn't able to recognize God's voice on my own. I enjoy reflecting on the different people in my life who have helped me discern God's voice.

I don't recall ever trying to place myself in this story as Eli. Maybe it is because I identify with the young child still learning about God more than the old priest who has years of studying and doing God's work.

But this week, I tried to imagine this experience from Eli's perspective. He is getting older... I can certainly identify with that after my Achilles' tendon surgery. His eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he couldn't see... I still have my eyesight, but as of just a few months ago, I now have reading glasses scattered around my house, tucked in my purse, and readily accessible in my desk drawer. Maybe it is a good time to try and identify more with Eli.

I am asleep in my room after another day in the temple. Samuel, who so faithfully cares for me as part of his ministry to the Lord, comes running in my room awakening me from sleep as he says, "Here I am, for you called me." No Samuel, I didn't call you. You may go back to sleep.

I try to get comfortable again. Just as I am falling asleep, he comes again saying, "Here I am, for you called me." Samuel! I told you, I didn't call you. I am just trying to get some sleep, and you need to do the same. Go back to bed.

It takes me longer to get comfortable again this time. I am tired and need more sleep before morning. God, can you help me fall back asleep? Then, a third time I hear Samuel coming, and he again says, “Here I am, for you called me.”

I pause and think to myself- I may be blind, but I can see that God must be calling this boy. “Samuel, go lie down, and if he calls you again, say ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” Samuel returns to his bed, but I continue thinking.

Samuel has always been obedient. He comes anytime I call, he eagerly listens to me, and he genuinely wants to learn about God. Then my mind begins racing... Am I right? Is it God calling to Samuel? If so, what will God say? I know my sons have been disrespecting God, and I have not stopped them. Will Samuel have a message from God for me?

I continue to toss and turn. I can’t fall back to sleep now. When will morning come? How long before Samuel comes to check on me? I could call, but what if God is still speaking to him. I will just have to wait.

Finally, I hear footsteps and a door open. Is it Samuel? They are very slow steps, not the quick steps that Samuel usually has when he comes, but it must be him. “Samuel, my son.” And then a hesitant reply, “Here I am.” “What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me.”

Almost 62 years ago, a young pastor received a late night threatening phone call that told him to leave Montgomery immediately if he didn’t wish to die. With fear coursing through his veins, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. hung up the phone, stumbled in shock to his kitchen, used his shaking hand to pour a cup of coffee, and sat down at the table to process what he had heard and discern how to respond.

We have this vision of a confident leader who took on racism and injustice with a message of non-violence and love, but as Dr. King sat in his kitchen alone that faithful night, he was anything but confident.

He was filled with fear, depleted by exhaustion, and trying to conceive of a plan that would allow him and his family to leave Montgomery without looking like a coward. As he sat in the silence, Dr. King remembered he was not alone and called out to God as he prayed aloud.

While he was looking for a way out, God would respond in an unexpected way. Dr. King explains in his book, *Stride toward Freedom*, that what he experienced that night was the presence of the Divine as he had never experienced God before. He heard his inner voice saying, “Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.¹” After hearing those words from deep within, King said, “Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.”

Dr. King was 27 years old when he received this epiphany that January night in the stillness of his kitchen. Just 27 years old, and God was telling him to stand up for justice and for truth in a world filled with violence that didn’t want change.

We have a story before us today where many didn’t want change, but God spoke to a very young Samuel like he spoke to a young Dr. King. God told Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle.” God is bringing about something new, a change in power. A new day is coming, and Samuel is part of that new day.

We focus on Samuel’s obedient response to God and the difficulty of telling Eli this terrible news, but Eli’s response was just as faithful and obedient. Eli knows this message means an end to him and his family, but he also knows it will bring a new day for Israel. So, he faithfully responds, “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him” even in the midst of hearing this devastating news.

Dr. King was also part of something new that God was creating. It would have been easier for him to leave Montgomery and let someone else lead this movement, but Dr. King chose to stay, to listen to God’s voice, and to faithfully respond. This new thing that God was creating gained strength that January night when he heard God speak to him through that inner voice as he sat at his kitchen table with a cup of coffee.

Today we also have a table before us. On our table, we do not find the comfort of coffee but instead the life-giving gifts of bread and wine through which God’s grace comes afresh to us each time we dine.

¹ King, Martin Luther, and Claybone Carson. *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. Souvenir Press, 2011.

Some may come to the table as Samuel initially ran to Eli, with obedience but not expecting to hear the word of the Lord. Some may come to the table as Eli, recognizing that God is speaking and waiting patiently to hear the word before responding, "It is the Lord." And some may come like Dr. King, exhausted and afraid but authentically lifting those same words that Samuel faithfully spoke, "Here I am! Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

We come to the table as individuals and as a community of faith. We come to receive the gracious invitation to an everlasting covenant, the new thing that God is creating.

We are part of this new thing, this new creation that God is bringing about. God speaks to us today as God spoke to Samuel, Eli, and Dr. King. Sometimes we have ears to hear the call for ourselves, and sometimes we need people in our lives who recognize the call for us and encourage us to listen closer.

God may not be calling us as prophets or leaders of a movement, but God is calling each of us whether we recognize God's voice for ourselves or whether we need someone to help us hear our calling.

In our own unique way, each of us are being called to participate in God's mission for the world. It isn't the magnitude of the call, but rather the faithfulness of our listening and our response.

May we have ears to hear and the courage to respond. Amen.