

“Listening for God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
January 15, 2012

1 Samuel 3: 1-10
John 1: 43-51

When I was in college, the new Presbyterian Hymnal was published. I remember being back home on a break, and during the worship service we sang a new hymn from that hymnal, called “Here I Am, Lord.” It’s hymn number 525, and is a hymn we sing from time to time here. For some reason, when I first sang that hymn, it was quite emotional for me. It may have had to do with where I was in life – it was a time when I was struggling with what I was to do after college. Or, it may have simply been the words and tune which spoke personally to me: “I, the Lord of sea and sky; I have heard My people cry. All who dwell in deepest sin My hand will save. I who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright. Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send? Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart” (PH #525). For the next few years, whenever we sang that hymn, I couldn’t get through it without crying, as I felt something deep inside me being led in a certain direction.

Even though this hymn is not based on the call story of Samuel which we have read this morning, it nevertheless reflects the call of God and the response of the prophet-to-be, Samuel. The hymn also reflects a deeper sense of call. The verses are spoken from God’s point-of-view, while the refrain is spoken from the human perspective. In that structure, and in the story from 1 Samuel, we come face-to-face with our faith: it is the Lord our God who speaks, and it is up to us to act upon what we hear.

The story of Samuel does not begin with his calling, of course. In the first chapter we read of his mother, Hannah’s, prayer to the Lord for a child, as she had been barren. Through Eli, the Lord speaks to Hannah and answers her prayer, and she dedicates her son to God under the supervision of Eli. The boy grows up into a young man, learning the ways of the Torah and becoming Eli’s apprentice at the temple in Shiloh. Yet Eli’s sons are not at all upstanding, and commit desecration to the Lord through their sinful acts at the temple. Therefore, God has decided that a change must take place: Eli and his household will die, and Samuel will replace Eli as the Lord’s chosen prophet.

Perhaps the most important element to understanding this passage is found in the very first verse, where we read: “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.” By presaging the story with this brief sentence, we are clued-in to the fact that what is about to happen is extraordinary. In other words, for the hearers in those days – and for us today – God is saying: this is important, pay attention.

I imagine most of us have read this passage and considered how God has spoken to us in our lives, leading us on a spiritual awakening. The boy Samuel is called three times by the Lord, and with the guidance of his mentor, Eli, is directed as to how he is to respond to God's call. Maybe when you hear this story, you are reminded of that moment when you felt called to follow Christ, that event which told you that you were loved by God and are being called to lead a new life.

Yet in many respects, this episode in the life of Samuel and Israel is more than “a conversion moment.” As one commentator has said: *This is not a narrative of Samuel's general religious awakening. It is not simply another experience on the road to religious maturity. Samuel is called by God in a time of spiritual desolation, religious corruption, political danger, and social upheaval. The word of the Lord is rare; the sons of Eli are corrupt; the Philistines are about to threaten Israel's survival; the pressures to move toward kingship will soon grow to be overwhelming.*

If the context for Samuel's experience is harsh, so too is the message he is told to bring. We sometimes celebrate so-called mountaintop religious experiences as ends in themselves, without considering what the God we encounter in religious experiences demands of us. Samuel is called to deliver a harsh message of judgment that is necessary if there is to be a hopeful new beginning for Israel in this trying time . . . This text reminds us of the spiritual challenges and social transformations that God's call brings. We are urged not only to discern God's voice but to listen to what it asks of us as well (*New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 2, 994*).

That may be the hardest thing to hear from this passage. It is not enough to simply say we have heard God's call in our life. We must have the courage to understand what that call is, and then answer his call with the called-for actions. It is not enough to say, “I've been saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ.” That statement of faith is nothing unless it is accompanied by a life-long response of action which may mean moving away from what is comfortable, and toward things which are quite challenging.

Consider what Samuel had to do in answering God's call, what is described in the 10 verses which follow what we have read this morning. He had to tell Eli that because of his sons' corruption, he and his household would perish. We notice that Samuel hesitates at first to reveal what the Lord has told him, for he loves Eli and does not wish to pronounce this judgment. But it is the mentor, the one who has taught

him to be humble and obedient, that urges him to share what is his own judgment. That takes courage, conviction, and ultimately, an immeasurable amount of faith.

Many times, the call of God comes at the beginnings or endings of our life. In this case, God was calling Samuel during an ending in Israel's history, so that a new beginning might occur. In many respects, we can see that happening in our life as the church. Endings may take place, such as dissolving a fellowship group, or people moving away or leaving the church, or restructuring the church's mission, and it can be very painful to work through those endings. Yet many times, those endings have to take place for new beginnings to happen. It takes courage, conviction, and ultimately faith to answer God's call as a community of faith.

Cynthia Weems is a Methodist pastor in Florida, and she writes: *We are told in 1 Samuel, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." I often feel as though all my years in ministry have been spent in times when the word of the Lord was rare and visions not widespread. I imagine a time when the Lord's voice might be clear and ever present. I pray for visions that draw a picture of what the future of our congregation, community, and city will look like. Must the voice of the Lord feel so distant? Must we wait like Samuel, so attentive to the needs and voices of others that we begin to mistake the Lord's voice for yet another demand on our time, energy and resources?*

These days our congregations struggle to make sense of the way cultural change has pummeled our identity. Pastors seek refuge from the voices crying out for their attention, few of which resemble the voice of God. Like Samuel, we continue to get up and tend those who are crying out in need.

Then Samuel receives a word from his wise mentor, Eli. "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

Eli sensed what was coming over Samuel. Even though the word of the Lord was rare in those days too, and visions were not widespread, Eli counseled Samuel to go, wait, and prepare for God's voice. (Christian Century, January 11, 2012, 20).

How do we learn to listen for and to answer God? Yesterday, the Deacons spent some time in a retreat here at the church talking about keeping Sabbath. It is one of the Ten Commandments, and yet how often do we follow that commandment in the midst of all the demands, voices, and pressures we experience? As Christians, do we know what kind of Sabbath we need for ourselves, in order to renew our hearts, minds, and souls, and thus hear more clearly what God is saying? Can we follow the counsel which Eli gave Samuel: go, wait, and prepare to listen for God's voice.

I will conclude with what I talked to the children about earlier. These sanctuary windows provide more than just abundant natural light, beautiful artwork in color and symbols, or a warm ambience in which to experience God in worship. They represent an opening through which we can see the community, and the community can see us. They remind us that we do not answer God's Word in isolation from the world. We answer God's Word by moving beyond these walls into the community which is yearning for caring and connection. The moment we ignore these windows and think God is only speaking to us inside these walls, then we are in danger of the Word of God being an even rarer event in our lives.

How do we listen for and answer God's Word? Through open minds and open hearts. Through patience and experience. Through guidance from others. Through courage, conviction, and faith. For in answering God's call, we are not speaking to our own greatness. Instead, we are testifying to the all-encompassing knowledge and love our Creator shares for us, his beloved children. When the Lord calls, stop, listen, and respond in faith, for that is what "a servant of the Lord" is called to do.

Thanks be to God. Amen.