

“Speak, Lord, for Your Servant Is Listening”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana
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1 Samuel 3: 1-10

One of the most ancient forms of reading and studying scripture is called *lectio divina*. I know Lisa has used it as a part of worship on occasion here, and we have used it or a form of it in various Bible Studies or group gatherings over the years here at John Knox. It makes no difference whether this is done as part of a group, or as a part of your individual spiritual practices. In essence, *lectio divina* calls for reading the scripture lesson three times, and after each reading you sit in a time of silence and listen for what God is saying to you through that lesson. The intent is that usually, something new is drawn to your attention with each successive reading, even though on paper, they are the exact same words that have already been spoken.

Whenever I have engaged in *lectio divina*, it is very revealing to me how something new is indeed brought to light after each successive reading. The first time through, it might be a word or phrase that catches my attention. The second time through it could be the image that forms in my mind around what the passage is depicting. The third time through it could be a specific direction that I sense for my life as it relates to the passage. This method of listening and studying scripture is predicated on the belief that God speaks to us in times of intentional reflection, when we still our hearts, minds and souls, and allow God’s voice to be heard.

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” This response by Samuel to the Lord’s calling in our passage today certainly mirrors the spiritual practice of *lectio divina*. This story from 1 Samuel has always been seen through the lens of the call to vocation: how God calls us to a particular purpose in service as disciples. And yet, it also mirrors our constant struggle to accurately and faithfully listen and interpret God’s Word to us - either as individuals or as a community of faith. What do we need to do, as people of faith, to most clearly hear and act upon God’s call to us? How do we listen for God’s voice amid our life as the church, where we can have so many differing outlooks or opinions? What needs to take place so that our total and complete focus is, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”?

The story of Samuel does not begin with his calling, of course. In the first chapter we read of his mother’s, 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 prefacing the story with this brief sentence, we are tipped 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.

Did you notice the time and the setting of this interaction between Eli, Samuel, and God? It takes place at night, in the dark, where seeing is made difficult, whether you are old or young. It is dim in the temple – we read, “the lamp of God had not yet gone out” (3:3) – so for Samuel, the ensuing interactions with Eli and God take place in diminished light, making it hard to see. For Eli, it doesn’t matter whether it is day or night; it is always night for him, as his “eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see” (3:2). When our ability to see is hindered, we must rely upon our other senses, in this case, the sense of hearing. The location of this interaction is significant, as well. We read that Samuel “was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was” (3:3). The holiest of places was where the Ark of the Covenant was kept in the temple. This old and young servant of God are about to encounter God in a holy space, while relying on faith to hear God’s voice, since they are unable to see clearly.

The ensuing interaction between God, Samuel, and Eli is familiar to many of us. On three occasions, God calls: “Samuel! Samuel!” On the first two occasions, Samuel believes it is Eli who is calling to him; he goes to his mentor, saying, “Here I am, for you called me.” After each of those first two instances, Eli tells his young servant that no, it was not him who called Samuel. It is only upon the third calling and response by Samuel that Eli’s wisdom is revealed and shared with his young servant: “Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening’” (3:9).

I find it interesting that after the first two instances, we learn that Samuel “did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him” (3:7). It took the wisdom and discernment of his mentor, Eli, to recognize that in order to hear the Lord’s voice clearly, Samuel needed specific direction and guidance. Only after his mentor’s direction could Samuel clearly hear that it was God speaking to him, with a specific word and direction for his life.

Has that happened in your life? Perhaps you are told by different people that you would be an excellent leader for a particular situation, but you brush off their comments with excuses of other commitments or wavering confidence. Then, someone you respect and trust comes to you and says this leadership role is not just something you should consider, but something you are called to do. All of those other comments were not window-dressing; they were God’s voice speaking through others. Then, in retrospect, you realize that God was truly present in those encouraging words – but it took a mentor in the faith to help you hear the voice of God in a clear, unambiguous way.

How do we listen for God’s voice – as individuals, as the church, as people of faith? I believe one factor that allows us to hear God’s voice more clearly is cultivating a fertile space or atmosphere in our daily walk of faith. What I mean by that is that we need to be actively preparing the space for God to speak to us. It may include personal bible study and prayer. It may include regular, consistent conversations with both friends and strangers that stretch our spiritual life. It may

include reliably participating in worship, education, or service as a part of a community of faith.

Why is this important? If all we want is God to tell us what we should do, and we aren't doing much else other than begging God to speak, then what kind of respect does that show on our part to our Lord? Frankly, that becomes a fairly selfish spirituality. God yearns for relationship with us through Jesus Christ. That relationship is cultivated by nurture, activity, love, and presence, not by holding God hostage for signs and miracles. In a maturing spiritual relationship with God, we are more likely to receive the wise guidance of an Eli in our midst, or, one day, offering similar mentoring to the Samuel's in our midst.

I believe when we are all actively cultivating our ability to hear clearly God's voice in our lives, then our shared life as the community of faith takes on a new form. That does not mean we all agree on important decisions or issues; we will continue to disagree on all sorts of topics within the church, from strategies for outreach, to music and worship styles, to preaching preferences, to cultural and social issues. However, when we are actively listening for God's voice in our lives, then we do not see ourselves in these decisions - we see God and the good of the whole. We see that it is not about our own individual preference; it is about what feeds and nourishes and strengthens the Body of Christ.

As I mentioned earlier, once Samuel finally listens to what God has to say to him, it is not a message of hope and happiness for his mentor, Eli. In the verses that follow our passage today, God tells Samuel that he is "about to punish (Eli's) house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them" (3:13). That could not have been an easy thing for Samuel to receive, nor for then Eli to have to hear. And yet, because Eli knew that it was God's voice which spoke to his young servant, he received that word of judgment with faith: "Then Eli said, 'It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him'" (3:18).

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 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 we consider our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ, perhaps our daily prayer should be Samuel's response. "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." We are listening for your voice of guidance, comfort, and direction. We are listening for your words of challenge, growth, and purpose. We are listening, Lord, for your voice, your call, your word. For we are, and shall forever be, your servants.

Thanks be to God. Amen.