

God's Call

It was a difficult time for the people of Israel. It had not always been that way. 150 years earlier, God had called his people out of slavery in Egypt. The Lord had sent Moses to lead them. With mighty power, God had delivered them from the Egyptian armies at the Red Sea. God had led them through the wilderness for 40 years. On Mt. Sinai, Moses had received the 10 commandments from the Lord. When Moses died, God had raised up a new leader, Joshua, and had brought them to the promised land, to Israel.

But now, the people were struggling. They lived in small rural villages, like Ramah, Bethel, Shiloh, and Bethlehem... existing from harvest to harvest, always under the threat of attack from their powerful enemies to the west, the Philistines. Of course, they had one thing that the Philistines did not... the Israelites had the Ark of the Covenant, the golden box which contained the tablets with the 10 Commandments. The ark was kept in the House of God, the sacred Tent of Meeting, in Shiloh. And the Lord God, the Creator of heaven and earth, His presence was there, enthroned on the Ark of the Covenant, with His people to protect and provide for them. And for many years, Eli, the priest in Shiloh, had spoken God's words to God's people, words of inspiration, guidance, hope.

However, Eli had grown old... he was over 90, and he was almost blind. Worse yet, it was rare to receive a word from the Lord these days; God seemed silent in this difficult time... just when they needed God the most. And Eli's sons, who should have long ago assumed Eli's responsibilities as priest—his sons were corrupt and had turned their back on God—as so many in this generation had. There was one glimmer of hope... Samuel. But Samuel was only 12.

Now Samuel—you need to know a little bit about Samuel—he was the child of promise. His mother, Hannah, had been barren, unable to have children. And she had prayed to the Lord, promising that if God would grant her a son, she would dedicate him to the Lord’s service. And God was gracious to her, and Samuel was born, and when he was weaned, his mother brought him to Eli, to the House of the Lord at Shiloh. There, he took care of the sanctuary, helping Eli with his tasks, assisting visitors to God’s house, sweeping out the tabernacle, even sleeping there in the Holy of Holies, on a mat beside the Ark the Covenant, as a guard and caretaker for the holy shrine. But Samuel was young—and while he had learned about God, he didn’t yet know God.

Now one night, as he slept beside the Ark of the Covenant, Samuel heard a voice calling his name. It wasn’t unusual for Eli to need help in the middle of the night, and so Samuel went to the house next to the temple and asked Eli what he needed. But Eli hadn’t called him, so he told Samuel to go back to sleep. A little later, Samuel again heard the voice calling, and again he went to help Eli, only to be told that Eli hadn’t called, to go back to sleep. A third time a voice in the darkness, “Samuel.” When he came to Eli’s bedside, Eli at last realized what was happening, and so he instructed the boy, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

Once more, the Lord God stood by Samuel and called his name, “Samuel, Samuel.” And in that moment, Samuel knew that God, the Creator of heaven & earth, the God who delivered the people during the Exodus from Egypt, was also his God, and was there with him, and he answered, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

“Speak, for your servant is listening.” These are words for us to treasure. They remind us of two important truths for our lives as Christians. And for each of these truths, I want to share with you a sign from American Sign Language. The first truth is Samuel’s truth... the importance of listening.. the importance of listening to God.

The amazing promise of this scripture is that God comes to each one of us, and God calls us by name... It’s mind-boggling... that God, who created vast galaxies and the smallest atom, who filled the world with all the beauty and bounty we experience... who looks down from heaven on the 7 billion people of the earth... and knows each one of those 7 billion people by name.... knows you & me by name... knows our joys and our struggles and our needs, and speaks to our hearts the words we need. Words of guidance... words of forgiveness... words of healing... words of love. That God loves us so much, that he sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, into the world, to show us how to live, to die on the cross for our sins, to open the door to heaven for us on Easter morning. And now, God continues to speak to our hearts in the midst of our daily lives. And we... we respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Then, there’s a second truth in this Scripture, and that is Eli’s truth... This truth is the importance of helping others hear God’s voice.... helping others hear God’s voice. We all need others to guide us in our Christian life. There are so many people who need a word from God—in our families, at school & at work, at church, in our community, in our nation and our world... Some have never really learned about God, and about His Son, Jesus Christ. Others, need encouragement to connect God’s words to their daily life. Like Samuel, many of these are young... children, youth, young adults...

And like Samuel, it takes time... God called Samuel not just once, but twice... then, three times... four times! before Eli was able to help him understand that it was the Lord who was speaking to him. God didn't give up—he kept calling Samuel—and he will keep calling those we know. How important that we steadfastly encourage, mentor, and guide those God has sent our way.

So, I'd challenge you: remember that you are like Eli, and that your truth is to help others hear God's voice... think of one person who is like Samuel in your life right now... who is that child, youth, or adult? What is one thing you could do to help them hear God's voice more clearly?

And so... God is calling our name...

This is Samuel's story...

This is Eli's story...

This is your story...

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Amen.