

“Are You Listening?”

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Scriptures: 1 Samuel 3; John 1:43-51

Epiphany is a season of illumination. The wise men seek the hope they have been searching for from afar. The light shines in the darkness. The blind see. The ears of the deaf are opened. New things, previously hidden from perception, are now readily available.

All of this reminds me of the limit of my physical senses. If I do not have my glasses, I can function ok, but I cannot legally drive, nor can I be 100% sure of whom I am seeing across a room. So if we happen to encounter each other and you've caught me without my glasses, I may not recognize you from a distance.

My hearing is a bit better than my eyesight for the time being, but it too has its limits. My main problem seems to be that my brain and my ears have a difficult time getting on the same schedule. It seems I am regularly asking the people in my life to repeat what they have just said because I supposedly didn't hear it, only to have my brain catch up a second later, usually resulting in me saying with the other person what they have now said twice. Bless her, Brittany has to deal with this more than anyone else. Or just about as often, someone will say something to me, and I will respond with an affirmative “uh-huh” or an “okay” only to realize a moment later that I have not in fact registered whatever I have just agreed to. It turns out, I can be a pretty terrible listener.

We have in our lectionary readings today a couple of accounts of listening to or seeking out the voice of God, whether in our reading from Samuel which tells of the prophet's first calling from God in the middle of the night when he was only just a boy, or in the story of the calling of some of Jesus' first disciples.

So in a season of revelation, our Scriptures invite us to reflect on what it means to listen well for the voice of God today.

Christian history is a bit all over the map when it comes to hearing from God. The results are, shall we say, mixed. I was just hearing recently of a 14th century Christian who claims to have heard that she was the incarnation of the Holy Spirit.¹ I learned this week that the man who kidnapped Frank Sinatra's son in the 1960s at the time thought he got the idea from the voice of God.² More important than any fringe story from history gone wrong, we ought to be aware of the things we think to be from the Lord that turn out to just simply be our own opinions.

There are also those of us who may have been formed in a Christian environment that wasn't allergic to the work of the Holy Spirit, but was certainly skeptical of it. This can make it hard to conceive of the reality that God can speak to us at all, and we dismiss true conviction, a true word from the Lord as just something we make up in our heads.

¹ Stevenson, Cait. "The Holy Spirit in Female Form: Medieval Tales of Faith and Heresy" <https://www.medievalists.net/2019/08/the-holy-spirit-in-female-form-medieval-tales-of-faith-and-heresy/>

² This American Life, Episode 205, "Plan B."

I think we can say that the reality lies somewhere in the middle - it is neither true that God speaks to us in the form of every little thought we might entertain, nor is it true that God remains silent. Given this reality, we need criteria for discerning the voice of God. We need to pray for wisdom. And we need to read the Scriptures well.

Let's turn to 1 Samuel chapter 3. Samuel wasn't expecting to hear from God. It seems likely from the story that Eli wasn't necessarily expecting much of anything from God either. It was a rough time for the people of God. This is pre-David, pre-Temple, but there was a practicing place of worship at Shiloh. The problem was the priests. Eli's sons were making a mockery of the priesthood and the service of Yahweh. They were not treating the people of God nor the sacrifices the people were making to God well. When God speaks of what they have done wrong, he says that they have been "fattening [them]selves on the choicest parts of every offering."³ That is quite an indictment. The ones who are set up to be the stewards of the place where God's presence meets with his people are misusing that office for their own gain. This may bring a little bit of clarity to how chapter 3 of first Samuel begins - "And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision."⁴ Unfaithful priests, leading to no frequent vision from God. But then comes verses 2 and 3, where we could spend the rest of the sermon:

"At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place." So we have a blind or nearly blind priest, not the cause of the problem of his rebellious sons, but a representation of how things have

³ 1 Sam 1:29

⁴ 1 Samuel 3:1b

gone wrong all the same. The future looks dim. But listen to how the scriptures continue: "The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was." "The lamp of God had not yet gone out." Boy, there is a sermon there.

I have a little bit of background in theater and making short films with my friends in college, so I find it helpful to imagine how I might set up the stage if I were making this story into a scene. Imagine an indoor scene, the house of God. It is quiet, night. An old, blind priest is laying down to take his rest. The people are as blind as the priest, not hearing from God because of the priest's unfaithful sons. But there is one light, a candle, small, but steady, gently illuminating the side of the Ark of the covenant, and the head of a child who is to become God's prophet.

God wasn't done with Israel, despite any disobedience of its leaders. His light had not yet gone out. When we listen for the voice of God, I fear we too often think the time is not right for him to speak to us. Things are too busy; we feel too far away. But the light has not gone out for those who would seek it.

God's voice also has a tendency to come from places we do not expect. If you were Eli, yes, you probably would have had an idea that your sons were doing what was wrong, and Eli did; he rebukes his sons for their unfaithfulness, but still they were the heirs of his priestly ministry. His best hope was to reform his sons before he died so that they could carry on in the service of God. He probably wouldn't have thought to pass on his legacy to the little boy who was serving him in his work. But Eli had

the wisdom and humility to recognize that God had moved in Samuel, the unlikely source for God's voice, and to nurture that connection.

Think also to Nathanael in our Gospel reading. He gets out ahead of himself a little bit by insulting Jesus' hometown. His regional bias is showing. Perhaps Nazareth was Nathanael's school sports rival or something, we don't know. But he doesn't mince words: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And yet, Nathanael is ready to lay aside his preconceived notions of what can come from which place when he sees that Jesus is the real deal.

These passages also show us how we are meant to hear the voice of God together. Listening for God's will in relationship, in community is one of the safeguards against just stamping God's name on what we wanted to do or hear anyway. Think of Nathanael and Philip. Nathanael might not have come to see Jesus unless Philip had pushed through Nathanael's anti-Nazareth bias. "Come and see," Philip says. I know we are all grateful for the Philips in our lives who help us push past preconceived notions and apathy into what God may have for us.

But this theme of the importance of hearing God's voice in community is even stronger in the story of Samuel and Eli. Did you catch that God's voice does not get heard unless they were both involved? God has chosen to speak to Samuel, but Samuel doesn't know who it is that is speaking to him. Were he alone, he would have just wandered around looking for the person who called him all night. Samuel goes to Eli three times before either of them figures out what is going on. And then he

gets not only the proper identification of God's voice from Eli, he gets how to properly respond. Samuel doesn't hear from God without Eli.

And Eli doesn't hear from God without Samuel. Samuel is the one whom God is choosing to speak to. He has ceased speaking to Eli. Were Eli by himself, the word from the Lord would have never come.

It takes a heroic amount of humility to listen for God's voice together. Look at the model of intergenerational relationships we have in this passage between Samuel and Eli. Samuel, the younger follower of God, comes to Eli, his elder, seeking advice and wisdom. "What do I do with this voice?" He has the humility to follow Eli's instructions. Eli has the ability to swallow his pride and recognize that the Lord is speaking to someone other than him, someone with less experience than him, and he jumps in to help Samuel along the path, even when that path results in a message that is bad news for him and his sons.

Contrast this with the ongoing strife we see in the world between the generations. There is far too much disdain for the young on the part of their elders, and from the young directed at their elders. This can often manifest in a lack of trust going both ways, leading to a reluctance in older generations failing to include younger ones in leadership and the younger ones blaming the older ones for all of the problems of the world.

I was at a work conference for a former job a few years ago and was in a breakout session that attempted to undo some of this ill will. Its subject was on working with

people of different generations. The idea was to list all of the defining traits of the generations we would encounter in the workplace, the Silent Generation all the way to Gen-Z, framing them all in a positive light, suggesting the relative strengths of and opportunities for each. When we got to Millennials, which happens to be where I fall on this spectrum, the same was done, "Here are their strengths..." etc. It was at this time that a hand shot up in the crowd - "You forgot to say that they are entitled." came a voice. Some murmurs of affirmation trickled around the room. The poor seminar leader replied as best as she could, but her entire premise had been cast aside. I had a hard time resisting the urge to immediately leave the room.

Samuel and Eli offer us a better model for following God together across generational difference. They model the mutual submission it takes to listen for God's voice together. We have in Samuel and Eli a model of a gospel-shaped way of being in community with one another and it sure beats what the world has on offer. The light of God has not yet gone out.

There is a moment in both of our stories, where the characters realize seemingly suddenly, that they are dealing with the true voice of God. That third time Samuel comes to Eli and Eli realizes that it is God who is speaking to Samuel. That moment when the formerly-prejudiced Nathanael realizes that this man from Nazareth is not only good, he is truly the Son of God. What is it that made it click? What is the key sign that the voice we are hearing is God's voice?

Jesus tells Nathanael that he is right, and more importantly that he will see even greater things than he's already seen - heaven opened and angels ascending and

descending on the Son of Man here on the Earth, an image that not only harkens back a few verses in John where it says that the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us,⁵ but also to the imagery of the Temple itself.⁶ Jesus is saying that he is the place where Heaven and Earth meet. He is the place from which we can hear the words of God. Jesus is the standard for determining what God's voice sounds like.

Do you want to know what God sounds like? He sounds like Jesus. Reading his words will get you attuned to his voice. Are you wondering if something you are hearing about your life, some nagging feeling you have about yourself is the real deal voice of God? Does it call you to be more like Jesus?

Jesus will say later in John's Gospel that his sheep know his voice and that they will follow him. The course of the Christian life has a definitive direction, towards Jesus, and following God's voice will lead us in that way.

Christlikeness is our destiny, our *telos*, as the people of God. And so listening to his true voice will result in leading us along that path. It may come at strange times and from strange places, and we may very well need some help to hear it, but that is where we are headed. He calls to you! May we all listen.

⁵ John 1:14

⁶ See Wright, Bird. *The New Testament in its World*, 666.