

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Are We Listening?

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Introduction to Scripture Lesson:

Once upon a time, a little before 1,000 B.C.E., midway between the call of Abraham and the birth of Jesus, it was a boundary time. It was a tense and troubled time: between what had been and what was going to be. It was a dark time, a noisy time: No one really knew what to do: and no one was listening to God. They thought they knew better. This God stuff just wasn't working for them. God's call and God's covenant had become distant, vague, and subject to manipulation.

At the point where our story begins appalling defiance of God's covenant had taken over. The people of Israel, God's chosen people, were swimming in an ocean of amnesia. They had forgotten who they were and who God was calling them to be. So it was time for God to wake them up and get their attention. This is the story of what God did one night, once upon a time, to wake up an old man through the voice of a young boy. The place was the temple of the Lord called Shiloh, where the Ark of the Covenant (which held the tablets of the Ten Commandments) was kept.

The Old Man was Eli: the priest in charge at Shiloh. (*Eli gets up and takes his place*). He was not the best priest in the world. He had mistaken Hannah to be drunk when she was actually fervently praying. Eli's eyes had grown dim; we are told—in more ways than one. His two sons, Hophni and Phinehas were total scoundrels. They ate the fat and juicy parts of the sacrificial meat; they messed with women who came to the temple, they listened to no one but themselves. Our story begins at night, with Eli lying down in his room.

The young boy was Samuel. (*Samuel takes his place.*) Remember, Samuel was one of God's miracle birth babies, God's gift in response to Hannah's great faith. She had promised to give him back to the Lord in gratitude, and so here he is, living in the temple, now about 12 years old, learning the ropes, as Eli's young assistant or acolyte. Our story begins with Samuel asleep at his post by the Ark, in the temple of the Lord.

And, of course, there was God, God who's Word had called Abraham, Isaac, Jacob...Joseph... Moses into a particular covenant relationship: God, who does things God's way. Not typically the way we would do things if we were God. Like in our story today: God only knows why God had given up on Eli's sons, and instead chose to call the young boy Samuel, not the preacher's kids, to get things back on track.

Now let us listen and watch the story of what happened that night at Shiloh...

SERMON

Are we living in a time right now, “when the word of the Lord is rare and visions are not widespread?” With this winter of crazy weather, crazier politics, and no Packers in the playoffs, perhaps we too are living in a tense and troubled time where we feel like “strangers in a familiar land.” Later this year, on November 27, 2018 we will reach our church’s 140th anniversary of living and moving and having our being as the Body of Christ we call FPC of Marshfield. And this coming Saturday, you will officially install me as your new Pastor. This boundary time is a good time to ask again: Which way is God calling us to go? The current climate calls us to listen, perhaps like we never have before.

What can we learn from today’s scripture that can help us wake up, and become more attuned to God’s vision for us here and now? I am struck by two moves in this story: First, God’s choice of medium. God gets through to old Eli, by giving the word to young Samuel, a boy whom we are told, “did not yet know the Lord.” And second, the seemingly abrupt turn in Eli, from being literally and metaphorically asleep, dim, dismissive, and deaf to God’s voice; to becoming completely obedient and accepting of God’s unmitigated criticism and condemnation.

Who would expect that young Samuel, son of Elkanah, an Ephraimite, growing up with his scoundrel adopted big brothers, Hophni and Phinehas, would be the One to whom God would entrust this hard wake up call message? Certainly the choice of such an unlikely medium would have been a surprise back then. But you’d think by now we would have come to recognize this choice of an unlikely spokesperson as a signature move of God. The voice of God has continued to speak from unexpected places an opportune moments ever since. A prime example is the man whose birthday we will honor with a national holiday on Monday.

Back in 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an unlikely spokesperson, being an unknown, Black preacher from the Deep South. He surprised (and scared) the white establishment with the size, the spirit, and the message of the March on Washington in 1963. God spoke to our country through Dr. King’s words, woke up our country through his “I Have A Dream” speech in which he set forth a new vision of this country based on the founding principles of our nation and our Bible. A vision that we believe in, had forgotten, or perhaps in light of Dr. King’s message, began to understand in a new way. Now over fifty years later, we look back and perceive that as a watershed moment for our country. But were we listening? Were we, and those in positions of power, ready to make the changes necessary to fulfill that vision? If you haven’t listened to that speech recently, I encourage you to YouTube it today or tomorrow. Then, let’s talk about what you hear in light of where we are today.

Not only does God's Word arrive through surprising media, the Message is not always what we want to hear. Not then, not now. As William Sloan Coffin, Presbyterian Pastor, Author and Peace activist has written, "God loves us as we are, but much too much to leave us there."¹ In love, God had some tough words, harsh judgment for Eli that would make the ears of anyone who hears it, tingle: eternal punishment for blaspheming God, for abusing the sacred trust even in the holy of holies. The young voice of Samuel was the medium through which Eli was able to hear this message.

Do you wonder why the story recounts not one, not two, but three times that Samuel woke up Eli, thinking it was Eli calling him, before Eli "perceived that the Lord was calling the boy, Samuel?" Louis Tillman, a young adult African American seminary intern at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, surprised me with a whole different take on Eli's delay in perceiving the Lord's voice in this story. Louis was leading H-Cubed an open mic ministry as a seminary intern at Redeemer Lutheran when I was doing my doctoral research; the center of which was listening to the young adults in churches express what had drawn them to church. My standard closing interview question to each young adult I interviewed was, "What are your big questions and worthy dreams" for the church? He responded immediately by raising a question that arises for him from this very story in 1 Samuel 3. Here's what Louis said to me: "I really wrestle with the tension between Eli and Samuel in 1 Samuel 3. I've always felt like I have a lot of Eli's in my life. I'm always saying speak I'm ready to listen, ready to be taught and to learn. I always wrestle with, how long did Eli know that was God? But later there's the threat you better tell me everything he says or else."

I had never thought about the story of Eli and Samuel that way before. Listening to Louis's take on this story got me to thinking: Could Eli have known that it was God calling from the first time Samuel ran to him, but waited and held back. And then as God called out three times, only by the third time could Eli accept that young Samuel was the one who would be transmitting God's message to him? This relates to the second move for us to consider today: the turn in Eli, the turn from denial to acceptance from turning a blind eye, to unflinching acceptance of God's condemnation. This turn comes to light through Samuel's prophesy, but I bet the turn began with a slow realization of a hard truth that he had been keeping inside, a growing itch, that at last could not be ignored.

Louis said one more thing during our conversation that woke me up to the variety of gifts each generation has to offer the other. He spoke passionately saying, "We need both generations to work together. They say, because the young people have the energy and vision and the old have the wisdom, but I've met too many older folks who don't have any wisdom and aren't concrete thinkers. I've met so many young folks who are extremely lazy. So I find each generation has lots of both.... I've met

¹ William Sloan Coffin, *Credo*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2004) p.131.

several old folks who have that energy and that wisdom so it's just how to break down that barrier to build up trust, so we can make effective change."

I believe this intergenerational dialogue can extend to include children and teens as well. One of the older white women in this same congregation, Janet, shared this observation: Watching Pastor Kelly with children and youth—he listens to them, spends time with them; they feel like they're heard. You don't have to wait until you're 18 or until you're an adult, or until old people retire, to be valuable in this church. He asks them questions, "what do you think about x y z" then he puts it into practice, not just in a report. He shapes what we do based on these conversations."

I was struck by how a culture of listening and dialogue in a faith community might begin with how we listen to our children, our teens, and young adults. I began to have a dream of pastoring a church where transformational dialogue could become a part of our spiritual A B C's, the alphabet of grace. What I kept hearing and seeing in all these conversations was this: how ready these young adults are to engage with us (the Eli's) to walk side by side with us, so that we can do the work that needs to be done right now: the work of passing on the faith to the next generation. Could we do that here?

There's a difference between passing on the faith, and teaching young people to be church people, so that they do church exactly the way we do it. I hear God calling us to pass on the faith, the flame and passion of the Holy Spirit to heal, renew, reconcile our way into Micah's vision: "to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God." What are we waiting for? These words are all too rare, this vision is not widespread.

What are we doing right? What are we doing wrong? What could we be doing differently? How many times does God need to keep calling us? Let us honor God with our listening attention across the generations. Let us begin at this table where Jesus is present and calls us to take, eat. Let us, like Samuel, say, "Here I am." Let us, as FPC Marshfield say, "Here we are," and be ready to listen.