

January 17, 2021

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Your Servant is Listening

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Opening words: According to the Revised Common Lectionary, this is the Second Sunday after the Epiphany. The lectionary points us to the Old Testament, 1 Samuel. Originally First and Second Samuel were one literary piece. It was divided into two by the translators of the Septuagint, the pre-Christian translation of the Old Testament. Both First and Second Samuel are named after the one who established the monarchy. Samuel anointed the first two kings, Saul, and David, but he also defined the new order of God's rule in the kingdom. It was written approximately 930 BC, after the United Kingdom divided into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. However, what is more important to us today than the exegetical understanding is the storyline, itself.

Samuel's story begins before his conception. It is found in the first chapter of First Samuel. According to the Bible his mother's name was Hannah. Her story is complex, but it is safe to say, the greatest pain in her life was her bareness. She openly showed her pain. During the annual sacrifices, she cried openly and prayed to God for a baby boy. You can say she was bargaining with God. She says, if the Lord gives her a son, then he will serve the Lord his entire life. The priest Eli saw the sincerity of her prayer and blesses her. In time, she gives birth to a son. His name means, name of God. However, we just call him Samuel. After the child is weaned, she holds up her end of the bargain. Hannah returns to Eli and offers Samuel to God's service. That takes us to today's reading, 1 Samuel 3:1-10. Let me call this message *Your Servant is Listening*.

1 Samuel 3:1-10 **1** The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.

2 One-night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place.

3 The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

4 Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am."

5 And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So, he went and lay down.

6 Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

8 A third time the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy.

9 So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So, Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

I love this story. Franklin Roosevelt (1882-1945) served as President of the United States from 1933 until 1945. He was our 32nd President. As President he was often forced to endure long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir." It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were heard. Nonplussed, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming." I tell you that story for one reason. The simple act of listening can be a complex topic. That takes us to today's scripture lesson.

We find ourselves in the third chapter of First Samuel. According to the Greek historian Josephus, Samuel was 12 years old when God started speaking to him. That was unique because their time was like our time, the word of the Lord was rare. In the darkness of that night God called Samuel. The boy assumes the one calling him is the nearly blind Eli. He ran to Eli and discovered the truth. The priest had not called him. The scene plays out two more times. It is on the third time Eli begins to understand. He instructs the boy to go back to bed and tells him to listen for the voice. If the voice comes then respond, "Your servant is listening." That is exactly what happened, and his life would never be the same again. Have you ever wished God would speak to you? Do not answer that question too quickly. That story is not isolated. Throughout the pages of the Bible God is communicating with people. However, it is not just true of Biblical times. It is still true today. God communicates with us in various ways.

Ben Springs is a pastor of the Good Springs Full Gospel Church in Parrish, Alabama. He says there are ten ways God speaks to us today. Maybe you have experienced one.

Audible Voice – That is what happened to Samuel. Has God ever spoken to you in an audible voice? **Angelic Visitation** – That is Mary's story. The angel told her she would conceive a baby boy. She was to name him Jesus. People have told me they have seen, only to them, angels in this church's sanctuary. **Visions and Dreams** – Joseph had a dream, and in the end saved God's chosen people. Maybe we should start writing down our dreams and start taking them seriously? **Signs** – There is nothing wrong with asking God for a sign to determine his will. Weekly, I will see something, a sign, that confirms I am preaching on something that God wants you to hear. **Coincidences** – This is no such thing as a coincidence. They are little miracles where God wants to remain unknown. **The Written Word** – The Bible is the general word of God for the masses. It covers many issues that are facing our world today. God cannot speak to you through the Bible if you are not reading the Bible. **The Living Word** – The living

word is Jesus. The Holy Spirit speaks to us personally. Remember, we believe in a triune God. **Through Relationships** – Eli helped Samuel recognize God’s voice. God can speak through teachers and preachers, but God can also speak through other believers, such as your spouse and friends. Each one of us needs wise counsel.

Through Creation and Nature – Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork.” How many times have you been moved by the beauty of nature? **Through Our Conscience** – God hand-wired us with an internal awareness of what is right and what is wrong.

That is quite a list. If you look at that the whole list, then you must admit God is constantly trying to communicate with us. We are more like Samuel than we care to admit. God is speaking to us, but we fail to recognize his voice. The question is not, why doesn’t God speak to us? The question is, are we listening? If that makes you think say, **“Amen!”** Here is a question you must answer.

Why aren’t we listening? Many have written on the topic. One is a man by the name of C. Kevin Thompson. He is an author and a member of the Christian Authors Network. He says there are five reasons we do not hear God. This is his list. I believe they have some merit.

- 1. We want God to show us, not tell us.** The issue is fear. This concept involves active listening. We want God to show us what he has done, not tell us what to do. It is a not always laziness. Much of the time it is fear. Our insecurities limit our behavior. We are afraid God will push us out of our comfort zone.
- 2. We desire immediate results more than a long-term relationship.** The issue is patience. We are not patient people. That is why we have drive-thru at fast food restaurants. Fast was not fast enough. We value speed, so we expect an answer from God immediately. However, God cares far more about having a relationship with us than us getting a single decision correct.
- 3. We focus more on What than Who.** It is the issue of identity. We are concerned with *what* God wants us to do; God is far more concerned with us understanding *who* He is. This influences His communication. While He might tell us what to do, He far more often is telling us who He is. When we understand the Who, the What takes care of itself.
- 4. We focus more on Us than Him.** It is the issue of selfishness. God loves us, but we are not at the center of His world. We like to think we are. Because of our unending focus on ourselves, we can easily miss God’s

communication when He fails to talk about our favorite topic—us. We need to focus more on God and less on ourselves.

5. We give more weight to our feelings at the expense of God’s Word.

The issue is sensationalism. I do not deny that God can speak to us through our circumstances, I just know we can never be certain if it is Him. The only certain communication we have from God is in His Word. Everything else must be seen with some skepticism. God’s Word is clearly meant for us. Everything else is questionable. It is not exciting, but you need to read the Bible!

God is speaking! The problem is we are not listening. If that makes you think say, **“Amen!”**

It must have been a week ago this past Wednesday. I was in a good mood. Kathryn’s surgery was over, and I had spoken to the doctor. Everything was going to be fine. Kathryn was fast asleep in the Intensive Care Unit, so I decided to drive to my brother-in-law’s, where I was going to spend the night. I took the long way to Bedford and drove through Garfield Heights. I have fond memories of my five years in that community. They were good to me and my family. I was in the north end of town when my cell phone rang. I did not recognize the number. I thought it was a sales call, but it was the business office of the Cleveland Clinic. The young man on the other end of the line introduced himself and asked if I would mind answering a few questions. I turned into a plaza, so I could give him my complete attention. The questions had simple answers, address, birthday, and place of employment. I told him she was retired, but she served a small membership congregation in Lowellville. He asked if I carried the hospitalization, then I told him where I work. Then, he said something that surprised me. He said, he considered going into the United Methodist ministry. I asked him why he did not. He said, he was considering the ministry to make other people happy. I said, if you are called to go into the ministry, then you will never be happy doing anything else. If you are not called to go into the ministry and go into it, you will be miserable. I know that is true because that is my story.

Looking back on my career, I can easily say God called me into the ministry from the very beginning. The problem is I did not hear God calling me from the very beginning. When I got out of college, I was afraid to pursue the ministry. I did not for two reasons. Both seemed logical. First, I was terrified of public speaking. Second, people who loved me passionately told me I was not intellectual enough. I feared they were right. For three years, I did secular work. I worked in a bank and found a sales position. Neither one satisfied me. I enrolled into seminary because I knew there had to be more. Can I be honest with you? I think it worked out. I have never really worked in

the ministry. Everything came to me naturally. I discovered being social was not a detriment, but it was a bonus. No one cares about Biblical Greek. However, I do get a reaction from people when I proclaim, I own the world's best dog. (Everyone should feel like they own the world's best dog!) In time, public speaking did not become a problem, but it has become my addiction. In May, I was be sixty-four years old. I only have one regret about the ministry. I wish, I would have not lost those three years. This is the point. God was calling me the whole time, but I was not listening. This is the question you must answer.

Are you listening? That is an important question because God is speaking. Samuel served God daily in the temple, but he failed to understand God's communication. Could that be your story? My prayer for you today is simple. I pray you eliminate all those things that are making your deaf to God's communication. Eliminate the fear, the impatience, and selfishness. I hope you identify God correctly because He wants to have a long-term relationship with you! It has been said, "God remains silent until we are ready to listen." And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**