

Choosing To Listen

Let me begin with a Sunday School lesson. I do this because most of us do not know this story, and we all need to know this story. Here goes.

In the history of Israel, Samuel is very, very important. He is, in fact, pivotal. And nothing that happens to him or because of him would have happened if he had not finally listened to that voice. What a story. It is a time in Israel's history before there are kings. Judges rule. Samuel is under the care and guidance of the priest Eli. As soon as we hear that the "...word of the LORD was rare in those days" and that "...visions were not widespread..." we know that something is coming, don't we? The aging priest sleeps. We know that it is near dawn—that time of deep sleep and vivid dreams—because the lamp of God burned all night and was about to go out. "The lamp was near the ark of God, the portable shrine or chest symbolizing the presence and power of the Deity."¹ That is where Samuel is curled up asleep "...where the ark of God was." Think of it as falling asleep on the altar. Samuel is called once; he thinks it is Eli. He is called twice; he thinks it is Eli. In our rush to get to the magic number three we can miss the crucial words in verse seven, in between the second and third calling. "Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him."

Let's stop right there. Do you understand what that text says? Little Sammy did not know God's voice when he heard it because he did not know God. Think of how often Jesus spoke of that truth. "Let him who has ears to hear listen." Think about trying to explain something to someone who just does not have any idea whatsoever what you are talking about. Think about

¹ Footnote to the text in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*."

trying to explain falling in love to one who has not been in love. Think about explaining war to one who has never actually been in battle. Think about trying to explain what we experience on retreat together to someone who was not there. Think about anything that you have experienced deeply, felt deeply, believed deeply—something that you just know as your soul’s truth—to one who just cannot understand what you are saying. What you know determines what you hear. Who you know determines what you hear.

It seems that the closer we get to trying to explain what we perceive as true and honest and authentic and real, the more likely we are to say: “this is hard to put into words.” “This is impossible to explain.” Isn’t that, at times, the essence of the human experience; isn’t that the heart of loneliness? Isn’t that what causes us to cry out: “you just don’t understand! You just don’t get it.” How often have we thought: no one understands me? How often have we said: “You do not hear a word I am saying”? How often have we pleaded: “please listen to me”?

This longing for listening is at the core of our beings and at the core of Scripture. God, it seems, is always trying to get someone to listen to him. From the ancient Torah: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is our God, the Lord alone.” (Deuteronomy 6:4) Hear God calling Abraham. Abraham. Moses. Moses. Jonah. Jonah. Samuel. Samuel. I am talking to you. Listen to me. Sometimes it is the voice of God calling directly; sometimes it is the voice of God speaking through the prophets. How often have we heard the words hear me. Listen to me. Hear me. “Hear me oh Israel.” From Isaiah: “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” (40:21) “From Jeremiah: “Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but do not see, who have ears, but do not hear.” (5:21) From Ezekiel: “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.” From Micah: “Hear, you peoples, all of you; listen, O

earth, and all that is in it...” (1:2) There is God’s word directly to some. There is God’s word through the prophets to others. And then there is God’s word through Jesus. He teaches us again and again about hearing and listening. “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

The Samuel/Eli story is one of the most important of all these “Listen to me” texts. “The beginning of 1 Samuel introduces the figure of Samuel, one of the great figures of Israel’s faith. He will fill many roles in his life: prophet, priest, and community leader. 1 Samuel continues the story of Israel begun in the Book of Judges. They are settling in the Promised Land. Since the time of Joshua’s death the leadership of the tribes of Israel has been largely occasional and charismatic, the spirit of Yahweh came upon particular individuals as occasion demanded. Those individuals were a mixture of military figures, prophets, and others. ‘Dynastic’ leadership, which passed from one generation of a family to the next, was not approved, that is reiterated at the beginning of 1 Samuel, where we are told that the sons of Eli, priest at the tent shrine of Yahweh at Shiloh, were ‘scoundrels’. Eli is now old and the question of leadership is open. In today’s reading we hear of the divine election of Samuel. The story demonstrates clearly that in spite of political maneuvers and expectations, the corruption of public figures and leaders, and forces for convention in society, God is capable of beginning again with (God’s) own choices and bringing hope to his people. There is a divine governance in society that may not always seem evident or clear, but is nevertheless real and effective.”²

The key phrase in this story is “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” We do not listen. Why? Well, for starters, we have so much more to listen to than the folks in the days of Eli and Samuel. On the East Coast of

² <http://vic.uca.org.au/~hwallace/WebOTcomments/EpiphanyB/Epiphany2.html>

the United States in the year 2021 there is nothing but noise. Talking heads. 171 television channels. News commentators. Radio DJ's. Rappers. Music blasting over loud speakers in elevators, waiting rooms, department stores, car radios. Raucous talk awakens us in the morning. Joe and Wolf and Ellen and Drew talk us through the day and into the evening. Anderson and Jimmy talk us to sleep at night. Anyone who wants a constant source of hostility and venom can find it day and night. Listen to the endless commentary, chatter, analysis, rant.

So what about those we DO know? There is the voice of mom exclaiming: "you're wearing that!" There is the voice of teenager sassing back. There is the voice of the toxic co-worker that causes the temples on the side of our heads to feel like they are going to shoot out like corks from champagne bottles and leave holes where our brains can fall out. There are the voices of teachers and principals and professors and students; there are the voices of snippy sales clerks and customer service reps (service/ha!) whose accents we cannot understand. There are the preachers who just don't know when to shut-up; there is the lonely neighbor who needs desperately to talk. We are drowning in noise and that is surely one of the reasons we do not listen the way Samuel listened. We do not stop and listen, ever, for the whisper in the night, for the still small voice, for the sound within the silence. We do not stop and listen because all we expect is noise!

We also do not listen to that voice because, if we do, we know we might be asked to do something, to go somewhere, to change somehow. As annoying and insistent as the noise around us is we can turn it off. We can choose not to listen. But the voice Samuel heard that night, oh that voice. The voice that Samuel heard that night called him to a pivotal moment in the history of Israel. "Samuel was the last of the judges. Samuel was the

anointer of the kings, the designator of the first two kings of Israel. Samuel anointed both King Saul and King David to be kings....But most importantly Samuel was the first of the prophets, where the Spirit and Word of the Lord came and lived...in a powerful way...Samuel was the first in a long line of prophets, followed quickly by Elijah and Elisha, by Isaiah and Jeremiah, by Hosea and Amos, by Daniel and Ezekiel, all of whom had the courage to speak honestly and forthrightly to everybody, including the kings over them...the whole cycle of prophecy begins for the first time with Samuel. The Word of God came down on him and he spoke with authority about God and his ways....”³ That is how important Samuel is. That is why he had to listen that night.

What about you? If God speaks to you, do you recognize God’s voice? Even if you finally turn off your television, your computer, your Bose sound system, your iPod, your radio, even if you unplug your home phone and turn off your cell phone, even if you screen your mother’s calls and pretend that you are not home, even if you silence all the rappers and rockers, and shut down the Baltimore Beltway and stuff cotton in your ears, even if you do all of this there is no assurance that you will listen. For to intentionally listen to God, to open your ears and mind and heart and soul to God’s word to you means—and you KNOW this—that you are opening yourself up to do what God wants you to do. And that means that you might not be able to do what you want to do. That means that life may look different than you thought it would look. That means you might be called to say something or to do something that your husband or your best friend or your grandmother or your boss may not want you to say or to do. When we listen, when we truly listen, we change. Somehow. Some way. We change.

³ http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/old_test_series_samuel.htm

When women and men in the Bible really listen, they change. Somehow. Some way. Always. Abraham. Moses. Samuel. Jonah. Mary. The woman at the well. The disciples. The folks who heard the post-resurrection preaching of the disciples. They hear. They believe. They act. But first they listen. Listening, always, always comes first. Think about it in your life. How does anything change? How does any relationship improve? How does any problem get solved? How do you grow? That is the point of listening. We let someone else's words and thoughts in; we let ourselves see things as they see them. We open ourselves up to growth. Attentive listening is one of the greatest gifts we can give each other. It is surely one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves.

In his classic *The Road Less Traveled* Scott Peck makes this point: "True listening, total concentration on the other, is always a manifestation of love." (Repeat) Think about God's desire, about the prophet's desire, about Jesus' desire for others to really listen. Why do you think that is so? Again, hear Dr. Peck's words. "An essential part of true listening is the discipline of bracketing, the temporary giving up or setting aside of one's own prejudices, frames of reference and desires so as to experience as far as possible the speakers world from the inside...This unification of speaker and listener is actually an extension and enlargement of oneself, and new knowledge is always gained from this...Since true listening involves bracketing, a setting aside of the self, it also temporarily involves a total acceptance of the other. Sensing this acceptance, the speaker will feel less and less vulnerable and more and more inclined to open up the inner recesses of his or her mind to the listener. As this happens, speaker and listener begin to appreciate each other more and more, and the duet dance of love is again begun. The energy required for the discipline of bracketing and the focusing of total attention is

so great that it can be accomplished only by love, by the will to extend oneself for mutual growth.”⁴ The work this takes is why Peck calls true listening love in action. “It cannot occur when people are driving, or cooking or tired and anxious to sleep or easily interrupted or in a hurry.”⁵ It is not effortless romantic love. It is the work after the honeymoon is over. And it is, more than anything, just that. Real work.

Listening to a child in need is love in action. Listening to a troubled teen is love in action. Listening to one in a nursing home is love in action. Listening to a grieving friend is love in action. Having the courage to be still and to know that prayer is more about active listening than incessant talking is love in action. And knowing when not to listen and who not to listen to can be love in action. To listen with love, by the way, does not mean that we must listen to the undisguised disdain spewed out by those on talk radio, by the misogynistic rant of rapper, by the narcissistic monologue of one who begins every sentence with “I,” or by the misinterpretation of misguided, mistaken preachers. We have the right and responsibility to turn off some voices because we know that God would never want us to go where they call us. Listening with love means listening with discernment, and that is work, too.

Of this we can be sure: we are called to listen to the voice of God. We are called to listen to the word of God. We are called to stop what we are doing and listen. We are called to turn down the television, to turn off the cell phone, to unplug the radio and—this is the hardest one—to turn off the cacophony of critique and commentary in our own heads. Then, and only then, can we return to Samuel. “But Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and

⁴ M. Scott Peck, *The Road Les Traveled*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 127-128.

⁵ Ibid, 128.

the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him”. This is the profound and pivotal idea. Samuel did not know the voice of the Lord because Samuel did not know the Lord. If I have never heard your voice before I cannot recognize your voice.

This is the theme that we see over and over again. We have to know God to hear God! We have to know Jesus to hear Jesus! Jesus says this very same thing in so many ways. He says that there are those who will hear and understand and those who will not understand. He says there are sheep who he calls by name who will know his voice and those who will not. “When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” (John 10:11) It is a stunning and startling thought repeated so many ways from Genesis to Gethsemane. To hear God you must know God. To hear truth you must know truth. To hear love you must know love. In other words, those who get it get it.

But wait! Read our text just one more time and learn something crucial. Samuel doesn’t get it on his own. The text says: “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.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.” (1 Samuel 3: 8a, 9) It is what Eli knows, it is who Eli knows, it is the faithful life that Eli has led that opens the ears of the novice. It is what you know and who you know and who you are at your core that determines what you hear. Listening to God, to the prophets, to Jesus begins it all, transforms it all. Listening is love let loose. Samuel! Each of you! Listen up!

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. February 7th, 2021