

First Presbyterian Church
1 Sam 3:1-19, “The Calling of Samuel”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 6/2/2024

There are few things more dangerous than a person
who begins a sentence with the words, “God told me...”
Have you talked with anyone who said to you,
“Well, God told me I was supposed to move
to Memphis.” (Or some other specific action?)
Have you had that conversation?
Was there some part of you that felt like running for cover?

Such a person could be considered dangerous for three reasons.
But before I go any further, I should disclose that I have been
this person myself, so I’m not pointing fingers here.
Such a person, even myself, could be considered dangerous
for three reasons: First, it could be that they truly believe
God has called to them with a message or a mission
when it was really just their imagination
or psychological projection.
Depending on exactly what it is they think God has told them,
that can be dangerous, but is typically harmless or even benevolent.

The second situation could be that they *know* God hasn’t told them anything,
but they want everyone else to believe they have a divine mandate.
This person is intentionally manipulative,
and that can definitely be dangerous.

The third situation could be that the Living God,
who made the whole universe
and is from everlasting to everlasting,
really and truly has given this person instruction.
And when God does something like that,
you don’t want to stand in the way of the plans.

Many of us are afraid of being associated with the first two situations,
and aren’t sure what we would do if we were in the third situation.
We typically avoid using “hearing from God” kind of language.

So what are we supposed to do when we come across a passage like 1 Samuel chapter 3, where literally *hearing* the call of God seems to be the focus of the story?

What can we make of such a story where a young boy hears from God, and what—if anything—does it tell us about how we hear from God?

The calling of Samuel offers us a responsible example of listening for God's call which moves us from misunderstanding, to readiness, to response.

But this story is about much more than a boy who hears from God. In the big picture, it's about passing leadership from one generation to the next.

Given the state of the church in the 21st century, this is certainly an area where we should be listening for God's voice.

To start us off, how is this a story that presents a responsible example of listening for God's call?

The two human characters in the story are Eli and Samuel.

Eli is a very old priest who was appointed by God, and he serves in the house of the Lord at Shilo.

Before the temple was built in Jerusalem, the earliest center for worship in Israel was in this city called Shilo.

Samuel has kind been adopted by Eli after his mother, Hannah, dedicates Samuel's life to the service of "the Lord," which is literally the Hebrew name "Yahweh."

Why would she do that? Well Hannah was barren, unable to conceive, which brought great shame on her in that culture.

So she prayed to Yahweh that he would grant her a son, and he did.

So she named her son Samuel which sounds like the Hebrew phrase, "Heard by God," (shema el) and she dedicates him to the Lord's service.

So Samuel literally grew up in the house of Yahweh, and Eli was a surrogate father to him.

Verse 1 of chapter 3 lets us in on an important piece of background info—

**“In those days the word of the Lord was rare;
there were not many visions.”**

People hadn't received any new words of prophecy or instruction from God for a long time.

That's how the narrator sets the scene for us.

So imagine that one night both Eli and Samuel are asleep.

Eli is in his usual bed, but Samuel—for some reason,
but we're not told why—was lying down in the house
of Yahweh where the *ark* of God was.

Just to be clear...the ark is not Noah's ark,
it is the ark of the covenant,

the box that holds the 10 Commandments.

This ark the thing Indiana Jones is looking for in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

It confused me as a kid, and I still can't understand
why they are both called “arks.”

So Samuel is basically sleeping beside

the 10 Commandments—already not a normal childhood—
when verse four says that Yahweh verbally calls to Samuel.

Samuel answers, “Here I am!”

Which in Hebrew is this great little Hebrew word, “Hinneni.”

The word “Hinneh” means “Look!”

But “Hinneh-ni” is a personalized version that means,
“Look at me,” or “Look, I'm here.”

I share that just because the phrase comes up so often in this story,
and these little details help us get inside Hebrew story telling a little bit.

So Samuel goes to Eli and says, “Hinneni, here I am, you called me,”
but Eli says, “I didn't call you—go back to sleep.”

And this pattern is repeated three times.

Each time we get to revel in the irony of it all—
that Samuel is sleeping in the house of Yahweh,
but he doesn't recognize the voice of Yahweh.

Almost like you could gather on Sunday morning with the body of Christ
for worship, but not know what Jesus is calling you to do in life.

After the second time, when the narrator shares another piece
of background information—he says,
“Now—Samuel did not yet know Yahweh,
because the word of Yahweh had not yet been revealed to him.”
The narrator’s not saying that Samuel was far from Yahweh,
he just wasn’t yet a *prophet* of Yahweh.
And so, he was misunderstanding God’s call.

This is where I think a lot of us live in terms of “hearing from God.”
It’s not that we would *deny* that God is at work in our lives,
but we’re also not exactly sure how to discern
if God is leading us in a particular direction.
This is the first stage of “misunderstanding” God’s leading.
It hasn’t been my experience that God often speaks to
his people today with straight up audible speech.
But God often provides reminders of the Spirit’s presence,
opportunities for us to step out in faith,
or God *disturbs* our sense of who we are and what we’re up to.
We can miss these simply because we, like Samuel,
aren’t accustomed to being sensitive to such things.

So the first thing we see in this story is that
Samuel *misunderstands* the call of Yahweh,
which I think we can all relate to at one level or another.

But the third time Samuel comes to Eli, something different happens.
Eli finally discerns that is God who is speaking to Samuel,
so he teaches him how to move from misunderstanding
into an attitude of readiness to hear from God.
In verse 9 he says, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you say,
‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’”

We don’t have to be prophets to quiet ourselves,
and turn our hearts toward God and say,
“Speak, LORD, for you servant is listening.”

This invitation moves us from potentially misunderstanding
something God is doing in our life to a place of readiness.

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. It’s an attitude of readiness.

So the fourth time Yahweh speaks, Samuel is *ready*.
And because he is ready, he can actually respond
and engage with what the Lord has to say to him.
The Lord calls his name, and instead of getting mad at Eli and saying,
“Hinneni!” he just stays where he is and says,
“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,”
and the word that God has for Samuel is shared with him.

When we open God’s word and read it with readiness for the Spirit
to reveal implications for our world, we are ready to hear from God.
When we listen to our lives – the places of grief, of distress, of celebration,
of deep joy, of meaning, of questioning –
we open ourselves up to dialogue with our Creator
who resides within us through the Holy Spirit.
When we pray with others, opening our hearts
and inviting God to take center stage rather than our personal agenda,
when we pray beyond the to-do list we want God to accomplish,
we are ready to hear from God.
What if you were ready to hear from God this week – or every week?

**The purpose of God speaking to Samuel was much bigger than
the young boy could imagine.
This revelation was about passing leadership
from one generation to the next.**

As I said before, Eli was chosen by Yahweh for the priesthood.
In fact, in 1 Sam. 2 we learn that Yahweh *promised*
that the house of Eli would minister before him...*forever*.
But Eli’s sons were degenerate and corrupt priests.
They misused their power and took advantage
of those they were supposed to serve.
All the while, Eli grew older and he was unable or unwilling
to stop his sons from abusing their power.

So immediately following the verse I just mentioned his promise,
he says to Eli, “**But now the Lord declares:**
**‘Far be it from me! Those who honor me I will honor,
but those who despise me will be distained.**”

**The time is coming when I will cut short your strength
and the strength of the members of your family.”**

Yahweh explains that he will raise up a faithful priest
who will do what is in the heart and mind of God.

That’s quite a set-up. When chapter 3 begins,
the stage is set for a major leadership transition in Israel.
It is a transition to leadership that courageously
seeks the ways and purposes of Yahweh
over and above human desires and purposes.

Young Samuel is the new leader that Yahweh
is turning to because of the sin of Eli’s family.
And here lies the burden of hearing from God:
This not what a teenage kid like Samuel wants to share with his mentor.

So Samuel lays down until morning—it doesn’t say that he slept much.
And he was afraid to share this harsh message with Eli.
But Eli calls him in and says, “Samuel, *my son*.”
And just as he did before,
Samuel says, “Hinneni...here I am.”
But even though Samuel responds in the same respectful way,
the entire situation has changed.

The reality is that once Samuel had heard this message from Yahweh,
the power has shifted such that Eli
is now entirely dependent upon Samuel.

And so in verse 17, Eli the elder priest,
has to ask his young protégé, “What was it God said to you?”
The transition of leadership has occurred.
Eli no longer has the inside track on the mind of God.
It is now Eli who must look to Samuel to hear what Yahweh is saying.
And after Samuel shares with him, Eli says,
“He is Yahweh. Let him do what is good in his eyes.”

Conclusion

The Bible said that in those days, "The word of God was rare."

But we do not live in a time when the "word of God is rare."

We live in the time following the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth
who lives and reigns with God the Father
and has sent his Spirit to be with us.

We don't have one person who we listen to who has the inside track.

Think of that. The same Spirit that spoke to Eli and Samuel
now lives within you! We all share in the mind of Christ.

Though we may often have misunderstood it,

God is calling all people to experience a transfer of power
in their lives: the power of God is within every single person.

God's power doesn't work by controlling from above.

It works through sacrificial love from below.

When we truly receive this word from God, our perspective shifts from
"I'm in charge" to "God's in charge."

Things are never the same again.

We won't work the same, play the same,
build friendships the same, vote the same,
or read the news in the same way.

If we turn to God as a community, and we truly say,

"Speak Lord, for your servants are listening,"
things are going to change. Why?

Because it leads to a transfer of power.

We know that God will empower those who seek first his Kingdom.

But we're so often afraid of truly readying ourselves
to hear and respond when we hear God's call.

We're afraid because it's dangerous.

It's dangerous to be a person who says, "God told me."

But I think if we're honest, we have to agree that God has called us.

The Word has been revealed to us.

And if we open ourselves to hear it, we will not be the same.