

“The Word of the Lord”

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Based upon Psalm 119:9-16; 1 Sam. 3:1-10, 19-4:1

A couple of weeks ago, we heard the story of the time when king Saul was so desperate for a word from the Lord during a time he felt God was silent that he broke God’s commands and his own ordinance by consulting with a medium to raise the prophet Samuel from the dead. Saul was desperate to speak to Samuel because when he was alive, Samuel was always a faithful prophet who could hear and convey the word of the Lord like no other. Today, we jump back in time to hear the story of how Samuel came to be such a great prophet. Interestingly, this story also begins with a period of apparent divine silence. “The word of the Lord was rare in those days,” the narrator tells us. “Visions were not widespread.” When we considered the text in our staff meeting Monday, this prompted someone to ask, “Was there a time when they were widespread?” I don’t know that there ever was, at least not recorded in the Bible. But I know plenty of people who wish that they lived in such a time. Imagine hearing God’s word regularly and personally. When the world is as deeply troubled as ours is now, it sure would help if we all could hear God’s voice telling us what to do. But then again, maybe God is, and we aren’t listening?

The world was deeply troubled in Samuel’s day too. Commentator Bruce Birch described “those days,” when Samuel lived, as a time of “spiritual desolation, religious corruption, political danger, and social upheaval;” in other words, a time remarkably like our own.¹ That could be why people felt that God was silent, I suppose. When life is hard or scary, it can feel as if God has abandoned you or is giving you the silent treatment. The people who created one conservative Jewish translation of this text that I came across this week clearly felt this way because they changed the opening verse to read “God withheld God’s word and visions could not break through.”² But the text does not actually say God was keeping silent to punish the people. Just the opposite, it suggests in a variety of ways that God was with them as God always had been. For example, it says that the “lamp of the Lord” had not gone out. Although this literally meant that it was the middle of the night, because the lamp of the Lord was one lit in the Temple from dusk to dawn, most scholars hear in those words as implied assurance that God’s light in Israel had not been permanently extinguished. God was still with the people. This truth is then confirmed a few verses later when God reaches out to Samuel with the persistence of a telemarketer. Four times God called “Samuel!” in quick succession, not giving up until Samuel is able to understand what he is hearing.

But before we get to that, let’s stay in the silence of that dark night a little longer because this story is rich with details and irony that are easy to miss if you go too fast. Eli, the priest, and Samuel, who had been his protégée ever since his mother dedicated him as an infant to God’s service, are asleep in the tent in Shiloh that served as the Temple of the Lord during this time period long before the Jerusalem Temple was built. Samuel, according to Jewish historian Josephus, was about 12 then, just on the edge of manhood according to Jewish law. But although

¹ Birch, Bruce, *The First and Second Books of Samuel*, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 994.

² Shmuel1-1 Samuel 3, Chadbad.org, https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/15832/jewish/Chapter-3.htm

he could see and hear fine and slept, literally, next to the word of the Lord by virtue of sleeping next to the Ark of the Covenant which held the Ten Commandments, spiritually speaking, Samuel was still a child. He did not yet know the Lord personally, having never seen a vision or heard God's voice. That's why he didn't realize what was happening when God started talking to him in the night.

Eli at that time was old. The text says his vision was poor, either simply to illustrate his age, or perhaps to suggest that this was the reason that visions from God were not being widely spread abroad at that time. You know how it's sometimes seems harder to hear when you don't have your glasses on? But notwithstanding his old eyes, and the fact that he never hears what Samuel hears, Eli is still more spiritually astute in this story. It takes him a little while to figure out what is happening because he does not hear the voice Samuel does. But by the third time Samuel reports hearing a voice, Eli can "see" that God is trying to communicate with Samuel. "Go back, and when you hear the voice, say 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening,'" he instructs the boy. Samuel does this when God calls again the fourth time, and receives the first of what would be a lifetime's worth of visions and instructions. Effectively, on this night, the baton of spiritual leadership is passed from Eli to Samuel. Samuel begins his own prophetic and priestly ministry which is grounded in attentive listening, and relaying God's word to others who have trouble hearing it; he does this with the help of the Lord, who makes sure "none of his words fall to the ground."

Author Ursula Le Guin once wrote, after observing that two clock pendulums side by side on a wall will gradually synchronize with each other and begin to swing together: "Any two things that oscillate at about the same interval if they're physically near each other, will gradually tend to lock in and pulse at exactly the same interval. Things are lazy. It takes less energy to pulse cooperatively than to pulse in opposition. Physicists call this beautiful, economic laziness 'mutual phase locking,' or 'entrainment.' All living beings are oscillators. We vibrate... Listening is not a reaction; it is a connection. Listening to a conversation or a story, we don't so much respond as join in— become part of the action."³

This physical truth suggests a spiritual truth that we don't always recognize but this biblical text affirms in its own way. There is a difference between hearing and listening spiritually. Hearing is about noise or the lack thereof. Listening is about connecting enough to understand, and in understanding, to get in better sync with another. So many people go through life wanting to hear the voice of God, as if hearing Samuel's story is a template for every call experience or the hallmark of faithful discipleship. But this is not a classic call experience text. It doesn't follow the pattern of most of the other call experiences in the Bible. It's really a text about how one person learned to discern the difference between the noise or silence of the world, and the vibrations of God. It tells us that when we don't hear or see or feel the word of the Lord, that isn't because God is silently withholding information like a sulking child, but because we either haven't yet discerned how God is communicating with us, or we aren't listening because for a variety of reasons, we are already phase-locked on something or someone else.

³ Le Guin, Ursula K., *The Wave in the mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004).

Eli, the old priest in the story, once knew how to listen. By all accounts he was a good man and a decent priest. But in the chapter immediately preceding this one, Eli got some really bad news from God delivered through an unnamed prophet. Eli's biological children were not like his protégée Samuel. They wanted nothing to do with their father's business and Yahweh. They were also greedy, power-hungry, and selfish in all kinds of ways, fattening themselves at others' expense instead of grooming themselves to become their father's faithful successors. Eli told them to stop but he couldn't really control them. What parent can control an adult child? So, a prophet told Eli that God was going to cut off his family from the priesthood, cut them off from being the spokespersons for God. It was a fair response on God's part. You don't want servants who claim to speak for you but don't listen to you. But it was a hard word for Eli to hear. So, it's not really surprising that after experiencing the pain of all of that, Eli began to tune out.

When you feel like all you are hearing is bad news do you ever tune out? It's easy to shut down out of self-preservation or depression if you feel nothing good will come from listening. We've all learned about that in the past year especially. You can only take so much of the news before you have to fold up the paper and turn off the T.V. or your phone, if you want to sleep at night. The same is true for people who feel as if God has said "No way" or "I won't remove your pain" a few too many times in their lives. Why listen if it's always bad news? Anxiety, depression, pain, grief, all of these feelings can interfere with discerning a true word from God because they keep us so focused in our own story that we cannot step into God's. We cannot discern the yes behind all the no's.

But there are other reasons why people stop listening to God. One is that they are already phase-locked onto the vibrations of something else. We are seeing this now happening to a surprising number of people in the country who call themselves Christian and then do things that Jesus would have never dreamed of doing, let alone condoning. This whole conspiracy theory addiction that is sweeping the country is both bewildering and terrifying because people who once upon a time seemed to be grounded in reality are abandoning it and changing their lives in destructive ways. They are doing this all to be part of an ideological cult which promotes outrageous lies and encourages violence by leading people to look for secret messages in everything. A word here, a phrase there makes people feel like they are insiders who know the real truth, 21st Century-Fox Mulders tracking their own X-files to uncover dark secrets. But in reality, they are just getting sucked down a rabbit hole of lies. And unfortunately, pointing out that fact doesn't open the eyes or ears of those who are listening so attentively because people don't get a dopamine high from being told they are wrong or from discovering that they've been deluded. They do get a dopamine hit from thinking they have found something no one else has found. I don't know how we as a nation are going to de-program all of these people. I fear that we will have to find some way to stop the pendulum they are synced with in order for them finally to be break free to find a new healthier rhythm. Only then will some of them realize that they haven't been synced with God, but with the worst that humanity can offer.

What about those of us who really want to be Samuel, however? What if you are desperate for a word from the Lord and even would be willing to listen to divine calls to change as well as words of comfort? I can't give you a tip that will guarantee that you will hear a booming voice in the night because very few people hear that and because very few people are

called to be prophets in the way that he was. But that truth notwithstanding, I do think we all can improve our ability to listen by following Samuel's example. He lived his life surrounded by the word. It was with him in the Temple where he worshiped and beside him when he slept. So, his whole life pattern was synced with the practices that God had commanded. God's word was also with him in Eli, who had a lifetime of experience discerning the word. The more time one spends reading the word of God in Scripture and spending time with people who hear God's word in their lives, and the more time one spends doing the work of God, the better one's chance of getting in sync with God because then you are just like the clocks, always close to each other. Don't wait to feel God stepping into your story, step into God's instead. Don't wait to be called in the night to put on Samuel's shoes, put them on yourself. Go to bed and rise with the word of the Lord in Scripture, listen for God's direction as one who expects to receive it. Before you go to bed at night say to the Lord, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening," and then pay close attention to your dreams. God is still speaking. If you aren't quite sure what the message is, ask an old friend. Sometimes it takes two to see.

Today's story, as I said, famously begins with the line "The word of God was rare in those days, visions were not widespread." But after doing some digging, I discovered this week that the word in Hebrew that is usually translated "rare" is actually "precious." I don't know about you, but I think there is a big difference in meaning between rare and precious. Not all rare things are precious and not all precious things are rare. But perhaps when it comes to the word of the Lord, it is really both. God's word is precious to those who devote their lives to discerning it, and rarely heard by those who don't. The difference isn't in how God behaves or in the word itself, it's in how we value it.

When my son was little, one of my favorite children's books to read to him was a story by Jim Tobin and illustrated by Dave Coverly called "*The Very Inappropriate Word*."⁴ The story begins with a young boy named Michael who collects all kinds of words— words he sees on signs, hears on TV, and learns from his teacher Mrs. Dixon. Every night, he takes all his words home, writes them down, and puts them in a box under his bed. One day on the school bus he overhears a word he doesn't know. When he picks it up, his sister and friends tell him that it's a very bad word, so at first Michael hides it. But after he keeps hearing people use it, he starts to wonder if maybe there is something special in its badness, so eventually he starts sharing it with friends, who also pass it on, until everyone in his class is saying it and Michael gets in trouble. Mrs. Dixon makes him stay after school. But instead of punishing him for repeating the bad word, she sends him to the library and asks him to find her new good words to be spelling words for class. Michael spends three hours surrounded by books and finds so many good and interesting new words that he asks if he can bring them home. The teacher says "of course," and the illustration shows him strutting home inspired with two red wagons overflowing with good words. It's easy to miss but falling out of the wagon is the bad word. Michael never notices because he has so many better words to treasure.

"O God, I will treasure your word in my heart," the psalmist proclaims in today's psalm. Not everyone is called to be a prophet like Samuel. Not everyone will hear a voice in the night or see a vision that convinces them that God exists. But if we approach the word of the Lord like

⁴ Tobin, Jim, *The Very Inappropriate Word* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2013).

Michael, eagerly seeking to learn more words whether they comfort or challenge us, we will dwell within the vibrations of God, and that can allow the words to get under our skin. We can also be like Mrs. Dixon, a lovely modern Eli-figure of sorts, able to help those we know recognize the difference between the good words in their lives and the bad ones. So, go out into our troubled world with your ears and eyes open because even in the darkness God is still speaking. The lamp of God has not yet gone out, and we need the precious word of the Lord now more than ever. May Samuel's response be forever on our lips: "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." Amen.