

**ASSF 24<sup>th</sup> February 2019**

*In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit Amen*

**1 Sam 3 1-10**

People just aren't good at listening. They'd rather be talking. Or doing things. Or dreaming about things. Or watching things. But listening? That's a difficult thing to do.

This story from 1 Samuel is often seen as how God calls us to a particular purpose in service as disciples. And yet, it also mirrors our constant struggle to accurately and faithfully listen and interpret God's Word to us – either as individuals or as a church. What do we need to do, as people of faith, to most clearly hear and act upon God's call to us? How do we listen for God's voice amid our life as the church, where we can have so many differing outlooks or opinions? What needs to take place so that our total and complete focus is, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening"?

In our reading we meet the prophet Samuel, when he was a little boy who worked in the temple under the supervision of a man named Eli. We are told in verse 1 that in "those days, the word of the Lord was rare; there were no visions." In other words, God was choosing not to speak to his people. Why would God do that? Why would God keep himself from his people? Well, when you study the history of the nation of Israel at that time, you learn that these people were not really behaving as they should do. No one was interested in listening to God, hearing his Word. People were too busy with their own lives, too busy breaking God's commands. The last thing they had time for was listening to a prophet speak the Word of God to them. And so, the Word of the Lord was rare at that time.

One of the most common things people in churches say is this: "I will pray about it." How many times have we heard the phrase: "Thoughts and prayers"? But is praying to God the same as listening to God? The answer is no. Yes, prayer is a good thing, and should be encouraged, but all too often it is like some sort of holy shopping list. Like doing on-line shopping we click those things we want and then expect them to be delivered. But prayer is not always how God speaks to us. Prayer is not always how Christ reveals his glory to us. It is interesting, that Eli, and Samuel were very busy working in the temple, doing religious things. And yet, verse 7 tells us that "Samuel did not yet know the Lord, the Word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." God was still a stranger to Samuel. So, it is with many people, including us, we are too busy to listen, so God becomes more and more a stranger to us.

But what happens when we stop, and listen to God? Three times God called out to Samuel, and Samuel did not know it was the Lord. Finally, Eli worked out what was going on – God was speaking, and Samuel was the one God had chosen to speak to. And then verse 10: "The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other time, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

From that moment on, God spoke to Samuel on a regular basis, and Samuel listened. He came to know God for who he really was, what he was about. He became a prophet who everyone respected in Israel, because everyone knew that God was speaking to Samuel, and more importantly, Samuel was listening.

Isn't it amazing, that we can get to know God, not by doing something difficult or complicated, not by being busy with church stuff, but simply by listening? What a blessing it is when we take time out of our busy lives and listen to God.

God is speaking to us here this morning in this service. Are we listening? God speaks to us through his word when we read from the Bible and listen to the sermon, when we sing hymns of praise and when we pray together. Most importantly, perhaps, God speaks to us when we encounter him in the eucharist. The broken bread and wine outpoured of Holy Communion. What will he say to **you** there? "This is my body, broken for **you**. This is my blood, shed for **you**, for the forgiveness of sin." These words are familiar to all of us when we gather together. Do you realize that when you hear these things, you are hearing the voice of Jesus Christ? Will you be listening? Christ is telling you that everything is good and right between you and Him, that there is nothing you have done that stands in the way, between him loving you. You are in communion with everyone else here in this church and every other Christian in the world, and **you** are in communion with God through the broken body and outpoured blood of Jesus Christ. It is amazing, that we can know these things, not by doing something complicated, but simply by listening to those familiar words and thinking about what they actually mean for all of us. What an amazing God we have, that he would give us this kind of faith simply through his Word. What an amazing God we have, that he asks us to do nothing more than listen, to say, as Samuel says, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

Let listening to the Word of God be for you your number one priority. The blessings you will receive are endless – a renewed understanding of God's love for you, a renewed faith, a renewed desire to serve him with your life. may these words be your motto, not just today, but all the days of your life.

Samuel needed specific direction and guidance. Only then could Samuel clearly hear that it was God speaking to him, with a specific word and direction for his life. Has that happened in your life? Perhaps you are told by different people that you would be an excellent leader for a particular situation, perhaps you see in the notice sheet that volunteers are needed for a particular role in church? But make excuses of other commitments or think you are not good enough to fill a particular position. Then, someone you respect, and trust comes to you and says this role is not just something you should consider, but something you are called to do. All of those comments were God's voice speaking through others. Then, in retrospect, you realize that God was truly present in those encouraging words – but it took someone else to help you hear the voice of God in a clear way.

How do we listen for God's voice – as individuals, as the church, as people of faith? I believe one factor that allows us to hear God's voice more clearly is making time, creating space and an atmosphere in our daily walk of faith. What I mean by that is that we need to be actively preparing the space for God to speak to us. It may include personal reading and prayer. It may include regular, meaningful, conversations with both friends and strangers that stretch our spiritual life. It certainly includes reliably participating in worship, and service as a part of this church.

Why is this important? If all we want is God to tell us what we should do, and we are not doing much else other than begging God to speak, then what kind of respect does that show on our part to our God? It becomes a fairly selfish spirituality. God yearns for relationship with us through Jesus Christ. That relationship is cultivated by nurture, activity, love, and presence, not by holding God hostage for signs and miracles. I have a distrust of any form of Christianity which talks of miracles, signs and wonders, zapping people in the spirit and lightning bolts. Of course, that might just my natural Scottish reserve. In a maturing spiritual relationship with God, we are more likely to receive the wise guidance of an Eli in our midst, or, one day, offering similar mentoring to the Samuel's in our midst.

when we are all actively cultivating our ability to hear clearly God's voice in our lives, then our shared life as the community of faith takes on a new form. That does not mean we all agree on important decisions or issues; we will continue to disagree on all sorts of topics within the church, from strategies for mission, to music and worship styles, to preaching, to cultural and social issues. However, when we are actively listening for God's voice in our lives, then we do not see ourselves in these decisions – we see God and the good of the whole community. We see that it is not about our own individual preference; it is about what feeds and nourishes and strengthens the Body of Christ. Once Samuel finally listens to what God has to say to him, it is not a message of hope and happiness for his mentor, Eli. In the verses that follow our passage today, God tells Samuel that he is “about to punish Eli's house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them” . That could not have been an easy thing for Samuel to receive, nor for then Eli to have to hear. And yet, because Eli knew that it was God's voice which spoke to his young servant, he received that word of judgment with faith: “Then Eli said, ‘It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him’” (3:18).

Many times, the call of God comes at the beginnings or ending, during times of change. In this case, God was calling Samuel during an ending in Israel's history, so that a new beginning might occur. In many respects, we can see that happening in our life and in the life of the church. Changes may take place, such as people moving away, or changes to the church's services, or changes to teaching on certain issues. I am sure some of you remember when Common Worship was introduced, when women were first ordained priests and then Bishops or when the Church of England became more open to divorced people and LGBTQI people These things were very painful for some people in the Church of England. and it can be very painful to work through those changes. Yet many times, those changes and endings must take place for new beginnings to happen. It takes courage, conviction, and ultimately faith to answer God's call. As the old saying goes: you will never walk on the water if you don't get out of the boat.

As we consider our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ, perhaps our daily prayer should be Samuel's response. “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” We are listening for your voice of guidance, comfort, and direction. We are listening for your words of challenge, growth, and purpose. We are listening, Lord, for your voice, your call, your word. For we are, and shall forever be, your servants.