

THE MIRACLE OF LISTENING

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1 Samuel 3:1-20

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Almost everyone I know has a moment in life when we yearn for God to speak that clearly and directly. It seems, however, in this day and age that our revelations of God are seldom so direct or obvious as Samuel's. But Samuel lived in a time similar to ours... "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." Samuel wasn't expecting clouds to part or fiery mountains to erupt with revelations from God. He didn't go to bed thinking, "Tonight might be the night. I'd better be listening for God." After a long day of work, Samuel just needed rest. Faithful little boy in the temple that he was, he'd probably worked hard lighting candles, holding prayer books for the priests, and keeping the temple beautiful and clean.

But then he hears a voice, "Samuel! Samuel!" He knew who usually called him with that kind of urgency--his boss, the high priest of Israel, Eli. And so, Samuel responded obediently and reverently--no complaining about how tired he was or how he'd just laid down for a nap. Three times, this voice calls to Samuel, and three times he runs willingly to his boss, Priest Eli -- even though his boss grumpily tells him each time, "Go back to bed." Finally, on the third time, Eli recognizes that the voice calling to Samuel had to be the voice of God. Little Samuel might never have known if his friend and mentor Eli hadn't directed him.

This story has much to teach us about the miracle of listening. Particularly since we are living in a similar time. It seems fair to say that the word of the Lord is rare in our day; visions are not widespread. When I go to bed, I don't expect to hear any voice

calling “Mary! Mary” unless it’s my husband’s voice. I don’t know even expect a *Monty Python-type experience* where a cartoon God appears in the clouds to speak to King Arthur to help him search for the Holy Grail. But I do often yearn for some clarity on something going on in my life or in our world and how I’m supposed to respond. “A little direction, please,” most of occasionally cry out in the middle of the night.

But if even Samuel didn’t recognize God’s voice when it came so clearly in the middle of the night, how are we to recognize when God speaks to us? Fortunately, Samuel’s experience gives us a pretty good road map.

The first step is to pay attention. Tired as Samuel was, he was alert enough to hear when God spoke. Granted, he was probably paying attention in case Eli called. But attentive he was. And that awareness and attentiveness are important aspects of recognizing God’s direction when it comes.

God’s direction may come late at night or early in the morning. It may come in the midst of a busy day or a harried family crisis. Yesterday, as my son Michael and I hurriedly packed our bags, grabbed a few momentos, and packed up our cat as police officers urged us to evacuate so they could concentrate on fighting the fire in our nearby canyon, something urged me to stop and listen. It wasn’t a voice, not even a thought really. More of a gentle nudge. Stop. Take a breath. This is really happening. Standing here in this dining room where we have broken bread with hundreds of friends over the last decade, looking around at walls filled with art work that represent 25 years of anniversary gifts between my husband B. J. and me, glancing out our living room windows at the horizon we have loved viewing each morning, and thinking about the

thousands of movies watched and games played from those living room couches, I simply said, “Thank you” to a house that has sheltered us well and welcomed and blessed many who have prayed with us in those walls, laughed and cried, talked and played, studied and learned, sung and worshipped. “Thank you,” I breathed to the rooms and the walls. “Thank you,” I sighed to God who was safely ushering me out of those rooms and walls with the assurance that all would be well, whether I ever see that house again or not.

Was it God’s voice? Not so much. More of a gentle reminder to take a moment to breathe, giving me a chance to reflect with gratitude and even say a bit of “Good-bye... just in case.” I’m so thankful I was paying attention and took that moment, for I now have a beautiful picture in my mind, a flash of conscious memories and grateful thoughts about a house well-used and much-loved, that I will always treasure – no matter what happens.

When we pay attention, we are gifted with moments like that. We find ourselves slowing down because a beautiful flower catches our attention, and two butterflies flit by to double our blessing. We take an extra minute to give a spouse or a child an extra hug good-bye, and may never know how often that extra hug was just what they wanted most from us. We notice a neighbor sitting on their front wall as we drive by, and then a little niggling worry has us double back to check. “Are you okay?” “No, I don’t think I am. Can you call 9-1-1 for me?”

For some of us, our conscience is the closest voice to God’s voice that we can find. That small voice that nags us when we’re drifting in a wrong direction and stills us

when we're worried but know we're doing the right thing... that voice is often God's best vehicle for getting our attention. Each of us will experience God's directiveness differently, but each of us can miss that direction unless we're paying attention. Attentiveness matters, so attend to attentiveness. Make time to pray or meditate. Take a deep breathe in a harried moment. Reflect quietly when facing a decision or wondering why something troubling is happening. Take time to pause and listen and pay attention. I have a friend who starts each day by envisioning herself as a little sailboat and her boat's mast as a direct connection to Spirit. "Set the mast, Mary" she says. "Let the Spirit fill that sail and tell you where to go, and each day will go exactly where it's supposed to go. If there's no wind in your sails, you're not going in the right direction." It is that clear to her, simply because she intentionally sets her mast. Attentiveness matters, for it helps us to recognize the nudges from God and the direction of Spirit as we move through the moments of our lives.

Samuel's second wise move was to listen for God in the voices of others and to remember we often need the help of others to recognize God's guidance. Samuel was open to Eli's guidance when he advised that Samuel go back and listen for God's voice. God gives us lots of voices, lots of guides in the myriad of people in our lives, each one created in God's own image. Pop singer Joan Osborne asked an intriguing question in her 1990s song, "What If God Was One of Us?" What if, indeed? Look at others as the image of God, and you may soon discover that the word of the Lord is not all that rare in this day; even visions are a little more widespread than we might have first guessed. As a matter of fact, I begin to see God all around me--in the faces of people on the bus, in

the sunshine on a cloudy day, in the wisdom of my grandmother, in the laughter of children at play.

The words and guidance from children are often the most meaningful things we encounter, so often the voices and thoughts closest to God. When little Samuel laid down in his room near the altar of God, he was the one who was quiet enough and special enough for God to offer a direct word. Not the well-trained and dedicated Eli, but the little child Samuel. Indeed, a child shall lead us--not just the child Jesus, but the children that God sends into our lives each and every day. The ones who throw their arms around us and say "I love you!" The ones who sing "Jesus Loves Me" with absolute trust in that promise. The ones who reach up to hold the hand of someone who usually gets left out. Reflections of God right before our very eyes. Let a little child lead you, and you might hear God in some wonderfully new ways.

Other times, our mentors, our spiritual guides, even our bosses may actually bring the voice of God into our lives. Sometimes a close friend or a spouse or a group of Christian friends carry the voice of God. That's the power of being a part of a faith community like this church: in the power of community, particularly a community of love, we can help one another discover and recognize the voice of God. Small groups like our Disciple Bands, our Choir, and Bible study and book groups are a helpful way to listen for God's guidance and receive the loving support Jesus offers through a small group of Christian friends. My church camp experience served as that covenant group in my life when I was a teenager. Each summer, we came together for a week and reaffirmed our faith and our plans to follow God's will. And each of the other 51 weeks of

the year, we shared letters & phone calls, reunion meetings and many many prayers. At that camp, and with those teenagers--probably the closest group of friends I've ever been blessed with--I first heard God's call to ordained ministry. Not through any big thunder clouds or deep-voiced old man, but through the experience of helping others grow in their faith and listening as others pointed out the gifts God had placed in my life.

And, sometimes God may simply speak through a casual acquaintance or a seemingly coincidental happening. Pay attention often enough, and you'll discover that most of those coincidences are more intentional than incidental.

God's call is like that--it comes in different ways and at different times, sometimes dramatically, often very simply. So, pay attention. Go ahead and be brave enough to listen and look for the signs. Take quiet time each day or at least each week to listen. Take a deep breath, sit quietly, or walk slowly, and listen for what comes to you. Read scriptures carefully, pause and discover a new insight. Pray silently or repeat a familiar prayer, and then wait. You may discover something you've never heard before. Make time to listen for God as you reflect on the events of the day or the week, and just might receive the messages God has been sending. It's not too likely that God will send a message in bottle or the clouds will part to reveal a giant king in the sky, but it's very likely that God is speaking in any number of quiet, simple ways each and every day--if only we will slow down enough and pay attention to hear that voice. If Samuel had been counting sheep or worrying about how much wax he had left for tomorrow's services, he might not have heard "Samuel! Samuel!" when God called.

And because we, like Samuel, may not be expecting that voice to come to us in

whatever way it comes, we are given the voices and guidance of others to help us hear. Lean on those you trust. Listen to the voices of children. Ask for the help of a friend. Discuss your confusion and questions with your pastor or a faithful friend. Without Eli, Samuel might never have recognized God's voice enough to respond, "I'm listening." But, Samuel did hear and Samuel did respond. We also are able to hear when God calls, and God will call in hopes we will listen and respond. Start enjoying the miracle of listening, as Samuel did, and discover how this miracle can change our lives, our church, and our world.

When we have listened carefully, paying attention and allowing others to help us along the way, we will know where God is leading. And we may discover that our direction is crystal clear and traveling the path where God is leading is suddenly much easier. For the word of the Lord in these days, although not rare, is rarely heard. And visions, although perhaps widespread, are seldom recognized.

Just as in Samuel's days. Days that grew into years, as that little boy grew into a man, still serving, first High Priest Eli and then King Saul until one day God said to Samuel the man, "Go to the house of Jesse and find me a new king." By that time, Samuel listened so well, he even argued back with God. "Saul will kill me if I find a new king!" Still, Samuel went where God led. Jesse brought out his eldest, most accomplished sons. Samuel looked at each one, listening as God told him over and over again, "Not this one. No, not this one either." Samuel looks at Jesse and asks, "Is this really all of them?" And then in a Cinderella-story moment, Jesse admits there is one other – his youngest, coming in from the fields where he was herding sheep. "Ah,

this one!" Samuel realizes as God guides Samuel to anoint David the next king of Israel, father of Solomon, and great great great grandfather of Jesus, the king of love who would come to help all of us hear the voice of God in the Spirit who guides our lives to this very day. Thank heavens Samuel had learned the miracle of listening.

Will you pray with me:

Great Spirit, Holy One, help us listen for your voice, look for your vision, and respond with all our hearts and all our souls and all our minds when you speak. Help us hear your wisdom, fresh and new every day, even as we pray the ancient words you taught us to pray, saying....

Our Father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy Name.

Thy Kingdom come.

Thy will be done in earth,

As it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

As we forgive them that sin against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.