

How To Hear God

Rev. William Stell

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1 Samuel 3:1-19

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again."

Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then 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.

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."

Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him." As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

The word of the Lord was rare in those days, our story says, and those who did hear it, like Samuel, struggled to hear it rightly. Perhaps we're living in similar days. Many people feel like they haven't heard from God in a while. And frankly, with all of the noise in our lives and chaos in our world, I think it's hard to hear just about *anything* rightly.

And yet, I do believe that God is speaking to each of us—through thoughts in our heads and feelings in our hearts, through things we hear in church and things we see during the week. I myself don't think that the word of the Lord is rare these days; I think we just miss it and misunderstand it, even when it's right in front of us. If that's so, then how do we catch it? How

do we notice and understand God's messages to us? How can we hear God well in this new year? This morning, I'd like to make just three brief suggestions based on this morning's story, three tips to help us recognize when God is speaking and what God is saying to us.

Tip #1: Pay attention to the children—and to the child-like. The word of the Lord just might come to you through a little kid like Samuel. Our Scripture is full of stories and sayings in which God both privileges and utilizes the little ones and the little things. Joseph is just a kid when God starts speaking to him in dreams. The most famous king of ancient Israel, King David, is chosen by God to be king when he is still a kid. And of course, in the Gospels, when the children are getting a bit rowdy, the disciples tell their parents, "Stop bringing them around," but then Jesus rebukes his disciples: "Let the children come to me," he says, "Don't stop them. For the reign of God belongs to such as these"—to those who are meek and trusting; to those who forgive easily, so they can get back to having fun; the reign of God belongs to those who aren't quite so anxious, so self-conscious, so bogged down by complex matters; to those who we often overlook or brush aside, but who God never does.

Now, certainly, our faith tradition is complex, and life is complex, and not every thing about it can be understood by a child (or by an adult, for that matter). So, when I say, "Pay attention to the child-like," I don't mean "Ignore anything that seems hard to understand." God speaks to us about complex, difficult things, too. (More on that later.) That said, I believe that at the heart of every word God speaks to us is a simple truth, a truth of love. And for whatever reason, children often seem to get it better than us adults do. Listen for that simple truth, friends. Listen for it as an eager, expectant child would. Do you know what words get spoken most often by God, or by messengers of God, in the Bible? "Don't be afraid." By far, that is God's most frequent message to us in Scripture. It's also one of the messages that children most frequently hear from the adults who love them: "Don't be afraid." Isn't that beautiful?

Tip #2: Let your community help you out. If you're trying to hear God well, you should be trying to hear the people around you well, too. In this morning's story, Samuel isn't a lone ranger. He thought he was hearing rightly, so he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me," but Samuel needed Eli to tell him "I did not call you" and to guide him in a different direction. Like Samuel, friends, we can't do it alone. We need input and counsel from the people we trust whom God has placed in our lives, because it's often through them that the word of the Lord comes to us.

John Calvin is one of the most important theologians for the Presbyterian tradition, and he had this idea that when God calls us to something, there is both an inner call and an outer call. The inner call is what we sense inside of us, what we believe God is saying to us. The outer call comes afterwards, and it's when we get affirmation from our community that we have heard God rightly. According to Calvin, as we make decisions in our lives, we need both kinds of calls. We need our own internal sense, and we need outside voices affirming our sense. Hearing God well means listening to the trusted voices in our lives—even if their words are tough for us to hear.

...Which brings us to our last point. Tip #3: Prepare to be a little rattled. In our story, when Samuel finally recognizes the voice that he's hearing and finally hears the message that God is speaking to him, he is unsettled by what he hears, because it's a message of rebuke. Not a rebuke of himself (that might have been easier for him to swallow), but a rebuke of his adoptive family, which happens to be a very powerful family. Samuel's caretaker is the elderly Eli, the head priest for the Israelites, and Eli has two sons who have been abusing their post as junior priests. When people come to the temple to make animal sacrifices to the Lord, these two sons routinely steal the meat and eat it themselves. A modern parallel would be a minister stealing money from the church's offering plate. And God tells this little boy to call them out. Samuel lies awake all night, worrying about it, afraid to speak truth to power and to a loved one. I imagine God said to him, "Don't be afraid." And the next morning, Samuel does it. After the word of the Lord comes and rattles him, he is faithful and does a little rattling himself.

Now, as we close, I can't help but notice that there's a widespread message in our society right now that connects to each of these three tips on how to hear God well. The message is two words: Me too—used as a hashtag on social media to testify to one's experience of sexual harassment and assault. First, many of these testimonies are coming from young people, and many of the testimonies from adults relay experiences from childhood. It's a reminder to us: Pay attention to the children. Second, #MeToo is all about community, all about refusing to keep something to yourself and instead choosing to bring it before the public, for the sake of the common good. It's a reminder to us: We can't do it alone. And third, #MeToo is and should be unsettling. It should unsettle the powerful men who try to sweep their sins under the rug, and it should unsettle every decent citizen, who will not to stand for a society where women are harassed and assaulted as often as they are. And of course, it should unsettle us Christians, rile us into action, compel us to be in solidarity with those who have endured harassment and assault. It's a reminder to us: Prepare to be rattled by the injustices in our world, and prepare to rattle back, each in our own little ways, for the sake of God's reign and those to whom it belongs.

Friends, I do believe that God is speaking to each of us—through thoughts in our heads and feelings in our hearts, through things we hear in church and things we see during the week. God is speaking. Let us ready ourselves to listen. Amen.