

I'm Listening
January 15, 2012
1 Samuel 3:1-20

*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. ²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the 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. ⁴Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵and 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. ⁶The 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." ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The 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. ⁹Therefore 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. ¹⁰Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."
¹¹Then 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. ¹²On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³For 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. ¹⁴Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."
¹⁵Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." ¹⁷Eli 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." ¹⁸So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."
¹⁹As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.*

Last fall, my husband's grandmother, Bea, answered her phone. A young female voice on the other end of the line said, "Grandma?" Bea didn't recognize the voice. She knew it wasn't her granddaughter Michel because she talks to her all the time. She knew it wasn't Katherine, because she knows Katherine's voice. So she thought, perhaps, it was one of her great-granddaughters and guessed, "Jennifer?"

"Yes," the caller replied, "yes, it's Jennifer and I'm in trouble. I don't know who else to call. I've been arrested in Mexico and I am in a jail. They say if I don't come up with \$7,000 that they will do something to me. You can't tell anyone grandma. I need your help. I need you to wire the money."

Bea was beside herself. She carefully wrote down Jennifer's instructions, went to the bank, and wired the money. A couple hours later, she received another call. "Grandma, this is Jennifer again. They want more money. Please grandma, help me. I'm scared." Bea went to the bank again and attempted to take out another \$7,000. She was clearly distraught. Someone at the bank who knew Bea knew something was wrong and he called her daughter who was then able to stop Bea from wiring the next \$7,000.

Bea was frantic, certain that Jennifer was going to be hurt. Finally, her granddaughter Michel came to the rescue. Michel took out her smart phone, pulled up Facebook, and showed Bea that all of her granddaughters and great-granddaughters were just fine – they all had posted that day. None were in Mexico.

I don't tell that story to make fun of Bea. She was the victim of a cruel scam. I tell that story to say that listening is tricky business. Voices are not always recognizable. Some we should not listen to.

Who are we supposed to listen to? How can we tell?

On his "End of the World" website, Harold Camping proclaimed, "...the Bible has given us absolute proof that the year 2011 is the end of the world during the Day of Judgment..." Camping never claimed to actually hear the voice of God on this matter but he did employ numerology to make this bold proclamation on behalf of God. His Family Radio ministry spent millions on more than 5,000 billboards and 20 RV's plastered with his doomsday prediction. Some listened. After May 21st came and went the stories of heart break flooded his call-in program. "I sold everything!" they lamented, "I sold everything to tell others... Now what am I supposed to do!"

It's no wonder we are cynical. It's happened too many times. We put our full faith and trust in someone only to be crushed with disappointment. We live in an age when we not only have to be savvy consumers, we have to be savvy listeners. We have to be able to sort truth from half-truth and nonsense. We need to be able to discern God's voice above all others...but how?

The idea that God speaks raises all kinds of questions: "Is that you, God? Did I hear that correctly? Am I crazy? Is that God or indigestion?" If you want to raise some eyebrows just go tell someone what God told you last night.

That is what makes this story about Samuel so scary. God speaks...the rest is about listening. Samuel didn't recognize the voice at first. He kept thinking that it was Eli calling out for assistance. It was all so confusing. Poor Samuel kept running back and forth from the temple to Eli's room. And we know from the story that no one had heard from God in a long time. It's no wonder – the temple had gone to pot under Eli's tenure. His sons had made a mockery of everything. They didn't care about God – they did as they pleased, ate what they wanted, and profited from their positions as priests. But Samuel was different. He was that little boy dedicated to service in the temple by his mother Hannah. She prayed to have a child. She prayed right there in that temple. Eli

was the priest that thought she was just a drunk muttering to herself. And somehow, she found the faith and fortitude to hand that child over to Eli to be a servant of God. She named him Samuel because God heard her prayer. The name Samuel has a double meaning it means “God who hears” or “one who hears God.”

But Samuel cannot hear God without a little discerning help from Eli. Eli may have been nearly deaf and blind but he was able to help Samuel in his confusion. “Do this,” Eli instructed, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

Have you ever prayed that prayer? “*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*” It’s probably the best thing Eli ever did – his gift to us – though it doesn’t appear that he took his own counsel.

What if we prayed that prayer before we came to church?
What if we prayed that prayer before we went to sleep?
What if we prayed that prayer before we started our day?
What if we prayed that prayer and really meant it – really listened?

One of the best classes I ever took at Iowa State was a class on interpersonal communication. One of the things I remember most was that when I talk to another person I have my world and she has her world. The goal of listening is to stay in that other person’s world – to visualize what they are describing – rather than jumping back into your own experiences and own world. When we are chomping at the bit to respond with our own experience then we are not really listening we are just rehearsing what we want to say in response to what we think the other person is saying. We’re not really listening.

Listening is work.

There is a wonderful story about FDR when he was serving as President of the United States. One of his responsibilities was to welcome long lines of people at the White House. He often complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said.

One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning."

The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvellous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir." It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Unfazed, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

If God’s voice seemed silent in the days of Eli it was likely because no one was listening. Sometimes we don’t want to hear what God has to say.

When Samuel finally tuned himself to God's voice he wasn't thrilled with what he heard. God told him to go tell old Eli that it was doomsday for him and his sons. Eli seemed resigned to hear it. Perhaps he looked at Samuel and found some consolation in knowing he wasn't a total failure. Samuel heard God.

In a world full of voices, not all honest or true, God is still speaking – are we listening?
Is what we hear consistent with what God says in scripture?
Is what we hear compatible with the teachings of Jesus?
Is what we hear confirmed by our community of faith?

I keep thinking that if Bea had known Jennifer's voice, she would have known it was a scam. The more time you spend with someone, the more well-acquainted you become with their voice and the better able you are to discern.

Samuel learned to listen. He came to recognize God's voice. It was as if the spirit came alive and God was near again – all because someone started listening.

The challenge for us to is to keep listening and make ourselves well acquainted with God's voice. It requires effort. It requires an openness to what God wants for us over what we want for ourselves. God is still speaking. The question is: Are we listening?

May we pray with Samuel, "Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening."