

A Still, Small, Voice: Listening

1 Samuel 3:1-9

January 18, 2009

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 he ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; 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 has 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.

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This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Watching the news this week, I was amazed at the story of the US Airways pilot who landed his jet in the Hudson River without a single casualty.

On Tuesday, Barack Obama – the first African-American President of the United States – will be sworn into office.

Right at this moment, around the corner, there is a nurse administering an IV line on a patient to treat an infection or a disease.

Three people; three different stories. Each person on a distinct path that has led them to this moment. What, do you think, the world would be like if they decided to take a different road?

What if C.B. Sullenburger, the pilot – who spent much of his career consulting governments and companies about emergency procedures, had decided to teach in the classroom instead of fly a commercial airliner?

What if Barack Obama – and his Harvard Juris Doctor degree – had decided to be a public defender instead of testing the waters of politics in Chicago?

What if the nurse around the corner had decided that she could not make the time for night school to get her RN degree – and remained chasing dead-end jobs?

Would the world be different? Would the news this week read of tragedy in New York, instead of “the miracle on the Hudson”? On Tuesday, would we inaugurate our first female president instead? Would another nurse do just as good of a job?

As Presbyterians, we don't believe in fate. We don't believe that things are fated to happen...as if there is some immutable force directing our every movement. But as Presbyterians, we do believe in calling – that each of us is called, by God, to do specific things. Sometimes we miss our calling – and then there are times when our calling is confirmed.

The pastor and author Fredrick Beuchner has said that “the place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

The word we use for figuring out that place is *discernment*. And for the next three weeks, this will be the focus of my sermons.

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There is an assumption I am making that is important to say from the beginning. It is this: Every one of us has a calling, whether that is seen in a vocation – which puts bread on the table, or an avocation – that feeds our souls. The word vocation (and avocation) is from the Latin, *vocare* – to call. It means that what we do is summoned out of us by someone else, namely, God. Vocation is a theological word.

Sometimes people think that it is only pastors who have a “calling.” The thinking goes – everyone else has a job, but a pastor has a *vocation*. Baloney. Every one of us has a calling, and there is no hierarchy of call. John Calvin thought so. Calvin thought that the call to public service (read: a politician) was the highest calling. With all due respect to Calvin – I disagree. There are as many vocations and avocations in the world as there are people – all of them are important.

God calls each one of us to something. Does it ever change? Sure. Do we sometimes misinterpret God’s call? Do we let other factors determine our vocation? Of course. That is why it is important to practice discernment.

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“The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” So begins the story of Samuel’s calling. It was not that God had stopped speaking. The reason the word of the Lord was rare was because people stopped listening.

Don’t miss the irony of the setting in this story. God calls to Samuel in the temple of the Lord. The word must have been rare if God speaking in the church was a reason for surprise.

People had stopped listening for a word from God. They had begun to pay closer attention to other voices that were vying for their time. There is a hard truth that most of us upper-middle class types would do well to notice. The more established the people of Israel became, the less a close connection to God seemed important. Some people – notably Eli the priest’s sons – even had contempt for God...believing that they were “self-made men” who could act like they pleased.

But God was still speaking. At the Temple in dead of night, God spoke to Samuel – who, like many of us, was unaccustomed to listening for a word from God. Samuel heard something but he did not discern its origin, and so he went to seek counsel from Eli.

In seeking Eli’s counsel, Samuel demonstrates to us the way that God’s call is mediated through the gift of community. Each of us hears many voices; there are many claims on our lives. And discerning which of those voices represents the will of God is not an activity that is best done alone.

In fact, discerning the voice or will of God on our own is dangerous business. The voice that I assume is God’s may simply be indigestion; or it might be my prideful ego. The point is – we need each other to untangle our will from God’s will.

Our church follows this model all the time. Next week the nominating committee will present you with a slate of officers and trustees for your vote. Their work was built upon prayer and the input of the community. They have relied upon the Holy Spirit to lead them to the names that will be before you. But next week, you get to confirm their work – or not. You are the test to their understanding of who has been called to serve

God’s call has two parts: one inward – experienced by an individual, one outward – experienced by the community. Your gladness – the world’s need.

Eli perceived that Samuel was, indeed, being called by God. His guidance to Samuel was not just to listen, but to respond, when God called again.

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Many times God speaks to us when we are still and silent enough to listen; when we take space away from the busyness of life to center ourselves in the presence of God.

I believe that – but I also have a confession. It is difficult for me to sit and wait – I am more of a kinetic listener.

I remember once in seminary during the daily chapel service, one of my classmates – who was a Quaker – was in charge. Chapel that morning consisted of an open Bible on the communion table and 30 minutes of silence. The only instruction we were given was that if any of us wanted to speak, or pray, or read from the Bible – we were invited, as the Spirit moved.

I remember the service because it was an excruciating experience for me. 30 minutes! Nothing but silence! Lord, deliver me!

Taking my neurosis out of the equation – and understanding that different people find their spiritual center in different ways – I do think it is helpful to consider the way that we listen for God to speak. And also the reason that we train ourselves to listen for God.

Seeking God's will or discovering our calling is different than a program for self-help. God's end-game is the redemption of creation – and that means that God's will for our lives has something to do with the world around us, and not just for our own success or happiness.

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As I thought about how we listen for a word from God this week, I stumbled across the Presbyterian pastor Eugene Peterson in my reading. Peterson describes an epiphany he had while studying Greek in seminary. Peterson discovered that there was a whole other voice within the language the New Testament uses to describe our relationship with God.¹

¹ Actually, Peterson talks about prayer taking place in the middle voice – but he defines prayer as seeking the will of God, which is synonymous in my mind... (Peterson, Eugene, *The Contemplative Pastor*, Eerdmans, pp. 101-105)

In our day-to-day language, we speak in two voices: the active and the passive. Bear with me as I play grammar teacher for a moment. When we speak in the active voice, we initiate an action that goes somewhere else: “I counsel my friend.” When we speak in the passive voice, we receive the action that another initiates: “I am counseled by my friend.”

There is another voice – used many times in the Bible – the middle voice. When we speak in the middle voice, we actively participate in the results of an action another initiates: “I take counsel.”

Peterson believes that discerning God’s will happens in the middle voice. We do not control God’s will; nor do we slump passively into the impersonal and fated will of God. Instead, we find ourselves participating in the result of God’s action in our lives. We neither manipulate God (the active voice) or are manipulated by God (the passive voice) – we are involved in God’s action and participate in its results – but we do not control or define it (the middle voice).²

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After Samuel lay down a third time, God called again. This time, Samuel had a mind to listen – and more than that, to respond. “Samuel! Samuel!” and Samuel said, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

God calls. Each of us. To a particular vocation; to respond in a particular way; to be in relationship with particular people.

God calls. Each of us. In meaningful ways.

It isn’t always the loudest voice we hear – but it rings the most true. And we are called to listen; to participate in God’s action by our faithful living.

May we be honest enough and vulnerable enough with each other to discern God’s voice within this community of faith. And wherever God calls us, may we have the courage to go.

² This explanation is taken directly out of Peterson’s book.