

People Who Listen
A Sermon on 1 Samuel 3:1-20 by the Rev. Philip Major
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One of the important characteristics for Jesus' disciples is to be people who pay attention. It's not easy to quiet ourselves and listen. Sometimes we make lots of noise and commotion, noise and commotion that is distracting, not only to us, but to others. Sometimes our lives are filled with commotion that is not heard or seen by others, but that keeps us from listening to what God is saying to us.

Another one of the important characteristics for Jesus' disciples is for us to let our lives be shaped by a wisdom that is much greater than ours. This is not easy. We can be very stubborn. We insist on defending our past and present actions. We will do anything to keep ourselves from acknowledging we've made some grievous mistakes. We suffer through terrible pain and sadness, anything to avoid admitting we are the ones who are creating the problem.

Yet God is persistent. God is faithful to us. God keeps speaking to us, even when we are not paying attention.

This is the point of our story from 1 Samuel chapter three. The boy Samuel was serving as an assistant to Eli. Eli was one of the last of the judges of Israel. Recall that the tribes of Israel were first led by prophets, like Moses, then by judges, like Eli, then by kings, like David. Being a judge meant Eli was both a political leader and a religious leader of the tribes of Israel.

Eli was very old, and he was losing his eyesight. This was not an especially good time for the tribes of Israel. Neighbors, cousins, brothers and sisters were squabbling and fighting. People turned to Eli's sons for guidance and judgement, but they were corrupt. Eli's sons were constantly taking advantage of the poor and the vulnerable. The understanding and adherence to God's ways and justice were rare in those days.

One night Eli was sleeping in his room. Samuel was not too far away, sleeping in the special tent, called the tabernacle, lying on the ground next to the ark of the covenant. The lamp that burned each night next to the ark of the covenant had not yet run out of oil, which meant that it was sometime in the middle of the night. *Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and Samuel said, "Here I am!" Samuel got up off the ground, went out of the tabernacle and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; lie down again." So Samuel 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 Eli said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And Samuel got up off the ground, went out of the tabernacle and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy.*

This story is remarkable. It is remarkable, not because God repeatedly called to Samuel, but because *Eli perceived the LORD was calling the boy*. The story is remarkable because Eli did not punish the boy for waking him from his sleep. It's remarkable because Samuel kept getting up off the ground, and going to Eli and telling him what happened. The story is remarkable because Samuel and Eli were creating a relationship of trust and grace. It's remarkable because Eli was paying attention, enough to understand after only three times.

In your life and in my life, there are times when God, or the Holy Spirit, or something or someone much wiser than us has given us a very clear message three or five or fifty times, yet we fail to pay attention.

A few weeks ago, a young man called me on the telephone. I've known him for most of his life. The young man has had many challenges to deal with. There were times when I wondered if he would just give up hope for anything good to happen for him.

The young man called me on the telephone and he said something I never expected to hear. He said, "I have to do something different. I have to change to make something of my life. The only way I can mess up is if I keep on doing the same stupid stuff." After six or eight years of struggling, it could be that the young man finally heard the message.

Some sort of higher power, call it the Holy Spirit, call it the wisdom of the universe, has been giving a clear message to him, day after day, week after week, year after year. The young man was very stubborn. It took enormous strength and courage for him to say, "I have to do something different."

It takes strength and courage for the worker, stuck in a dead-end job, to say, "I have to do something different." It takes strength and courage for the parent to say, "I made a mistake." It takes strength and courage for us to say, "It's time for me to stop smoking, or stop driving my car, or stop working."

It takes strength and courage for the convict to say, "I am the one at fault. I am the one who needs to ask for forgiveness." It takes strength and courage for the addict or the alcoholic to say, "I am creating the problem. I have no one to blame but myself." It takes strength and courage for the spouse to stop being defensive. It takes strength and courage for the victim of abuse to stop making excuses and do something different.

God is creating out us of love and for the purposes of love. Living for the purposes of love requires us to summon our strength and courage and pay attention to what is really happening in our lives. When we are paying attention, when we are listening, we will hear God's voice, giving us a clear message.

Each one of us is different. Each one has a different story. Each one has different challenges. Yet here is something I am sure of. God is speaking to you. The remarkable part of the story of Samuel is not that God was speaking, but that the people actually heard what God was saying.

God is speaking to you. God is giving you a message of wisdom and guidance for your life. God is encouraging you to pursue the path of love.

Samuel was sleeping on the ground, in a tent, next to the ark of the covenant, when he heard God speaking to him. I'm pretty sure that is not the place where I will hear God speaking to me, because I've tried it recently. I've tried sleeping on the ground, in a tent. When I am trying to sleep on the ground, every single bone in my body is shouting at me, "What were you thinking?"

You may not hear God's voice when you are sleeping in a tent. You might hear it while you are sitting in your chair, knitting a sweater. You might hear God's message while you are cooking dinner. You might hear God speaking to you while you are waiting at the bus stop or walking through the park. You might hear God voice while you are lying quietly, on your bed. You might hear God speaking to you in a dream, or in the voice of someone you trust.

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 abuses that he knew about, because his sons were abusing the authority given to them, and he did not restrain them."

When you hear God speaking to you, the message will be different. God's message will be a message of confidence, confidence that you can make the change you need to make, confidence that you can follow God's wisdom and love. It will be a message of correction, helping you admit to the mistakes you have made and ways you have hurt your friends and loved ones.

When you are paying attention, you will hear God speaking to you. God's message will be a message of hope. God will help you see that God is the one who finds a way out of no way. God will guide you to take on the task, to make a commitment, to create healthy boundaries for yourself or for your family.

When you quiet yourself and listen, you will hear God's still, small voice. You may not hear distinct, individual words like Samuel, but you will understand the message. God will give you words of encouragement, a message you have known all your life, or a message you have never heard before. God will encourage you to live in God's image, for the purposes of love.