

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Good Listeners”

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1 Samuel 3: 1-10

3 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.

2 At 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.

10 Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’

Christian writer Charles Swindoll once found himself with too many commitments in too few days. He got nervous and quite tense about it. He snapped at his wife and his children. He got irritated at any unexpected interruption during the day. He gobbled down his food at mealtime. Soon everything around his home started reflecting the pattern of his urgent, hurry-up style. Things were miserable. At supper one evening his youngest daughter said to him, "Daddy, I wanna tell you something that happened at school. I know you are busy so I will tell you really fast." Suddenly realizing the effect he was having upon his family, Swindoll answered "Honey, you can tell me and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly." His daughter's response, "Then listen slowly."

Here is how we spend some of our time in the Ritter household. This was when Maren was with us, a week or two ago. I offer the illustration, assuming that things may be the same for many of your families. I was in the basement on the elliptical trainer, listening to my Ipod with my headphones, all the while watching an exciting college bowl game on TV. That's called leisure multi-tasking! Amelia was in the basement also, but on the nearby desktop computer, downloading some music from CD's to her I-Tunes account. At the same time she was texting friends. I didn't think to ask but her television was probably on in her bedroom. Maren was in the living room on her laptop computer, checking Facebook and her other social media all the while texting friends. She had the television playing but really wasn't watching it. It supplied background noise I suppose. Laura was at the kitchen table, talking on her cell phone to her sister, at the same time working at her laptop, answering correspondence and submitting daily reports. To top it off, I believe the dogs were growling and barking at some strange noise outside. I am certain that Detroit Edison, AT&T and Verizon Wireless just love my family!

My point is that at that moment in time, there was a lot of noise in the house, a lot of activity among the four of us, a lot of sound being made, but I'm not sure there was a whole lot of communication. There certainly wasn't any face-to-face talking and listening going on.

A student in a Covenant class once asked me, "Rev. Ritter, do you believe that God really speaks to us today?" I went on to provide an answer about how God's revelation could be found in many ways even today. I told him I believed that God's word is present in the stories of Scripture, in meditation, and in the presence of friends and family around us. The student wanted a clearer answer. He said, "No, I mean do some people really hear God's voice today. Do they really hear him speaking like the people in the Bible did?" That was a much tougher question for me to answer. I thought about the extremely practical question that author Lewis Smedes once asked when interviewed on the PBS series on Genesis. He wondered aloud if it the technology were available back then, would a tape recorder have picked up the sound of God's voice as it spoke to Abram and Noah and Isaiah? It is really a fascinating question. Was God's voice clearer and louder in the times of the ancient spiritual giants than it is in our times of earthly darkness, modern complexity, and spiritual uncertainty?

I believe that the Scripture lesson this morning speaks to that very question. Evidently the people of Eli and Samuel's world wondered when and if God would ever speak again? It was plain as day. Scripture says, "In those days the word of the Lord was rare. There were not many visions."

At first one might feel rather sorry for Eli. Perhaps the old priest had been listening for God's voice for years only to resign himself to failure and disappointment. But if you read the earlier pages of the book of I Samuel, you might get a different idea. Eli seems to be a most complacent priest. He had ignored the sins of his sons. He had become content and accepting of what was going on in the temple and perhaps in the world. He had turned a deaf ear to sin and to the needs of others. He had settled down to a "whatever happens is all right with me" attitude.

Perhaps Eli was even quite happy and satisfied that the word of the Lord was rare in those days. Life was easier that way. When God doesn't provide any vision, those who wait for the visions don't have to do anything. When God doesn't call you, you don't have to answer. When God doesn't speak to you, you aren't held responsible.

In fact, we may feel that way today. It is comforting for us to know that the word of the Lord is rare these days. If we don't hear God speaking than we can go on living exactly as we are. We've become so familiar with the Word of God that it has lost its edge for us these days. Barbara Brown Taylor writes that "the word of God may not be chained, but you would be hard pressed to believe it on most Sunday mornings. We read Scripture out loud as though we were reading income tax instructions to each other. Children draw on offering envelopes during sermons and adults balance their checkbooks. If someone breaks the rules and gets excited by the word, there are plenty of people including the preacher- who can be counted on to calm that person down. We are old friends with the word by now. There is nothing to get excited about."

But the word of God came to the youngster Samuel. "Samuel, Samuel. I am about to do something that will make the ears of everyone in the land tingle." God's word was spoken and it was heard by one with the energy, excitement, and awareness to listen. And although Eli had not heard the word for himself, he maintained enough of its promise in his heart to know that God's word might stir in another person. He encouraged Samuel to open himself to the word. He pushed Samuel past the fear of the divine challenge. He taught Samuel that it is always a risk to dare to believe that God is calling your name but it is a risk that faith demands. It is the old priest Eli who somehow managed to understand that God's word was indeed rare, but it was rare not because God has withdrawn from the company of humanity. It was rare only because he and others like him had falsely convinced themselves that they were hearing nothing new.

There is a story among the ancient desert fathers in Egypt about a group of monks who along with people of the village went to visit Father Felix. They begged him to say a word to them but the old man kept silent. After they pleaded for a long, long time he finally spoke, saying, "You wish to hear a word?" "Yes, Father," they answered. "We wish to hear your word." The Father Felix continued, "There are no more words nowadays. When some came to consult with the fathers and honored their wisdom with action, God showed the father how to speak. But now, people come to seek wisdom but ignore that which they hear, God had withdrawn the grace of the word from the church fathers. They do not find anything to say because there are no longer any who carry their words out." Upon hearing this, the brothers groaned, "Pray for us, father."

If there are no more words nowadays, if the word of God is rare in this day, it probably has little to do with God ability to speak. It has more to do with our refusal to listen. God is persistent in speaking to our world and to us. Even when we are hard of hearing or choose not to listen, God takes our hand and leads us into places we would never dare or dream to go on our own. Like the young Samuel, we need to quiet ourselves and be intentional in our listening for divine truth as it speaks in the midst of life.

Listen now. God speaks. When and where will that voice lead us?