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CHOOSING TO LISTEN

1 Samuel 3: 1-18; Mark 1: 14-20

Patrick had a keen appreciation for the gift of hearing. Now that his hearing was almost gone, he knew what a gift it was and how most people don't even think about it. Patrick had lost his hearing on his right side while serving on a ship during WW2. The canons on the ship would be fired regularly and he was close by when they were fired. No one ever thought of ear protectors then. His hearing on his left side started to go gradually as he got older. Thankfully, we live in a time and a place where hearing aids and the technology that goes into them are quite advanced. But things don't work out equally well for all, as some of you here know better than me. Now into his mid-nineties, Patrick can barely hear a thing.

Of course, hearing is not just a physical thing. We use the word hearing and the cognate word 'listening' to describe all kinds of ways we engage with others and with life. When we tell someone they're not listening to us, we know it's not a question of whether they can actually hear us. They can. It's a question of whether they are paying attention or absorbing what we're saying. Sometimes people refuse to listen to what their bodies are telling them or what situations in their lives are telling them. And this is not about hearing something audibly, but about taking something seriously that's happening, requiring attention and change.

But listening is also a spiritual thing. When Jesus is baptized by John, a voice is heard, saying: 'This is my beloved son; listen to him!' And when Jesus is urging his audiences to really pay attention, he says this: 'Those who have ears, let them hear.' What this all means is that people need to listen not just with their ears, but with their hearts and souls... unless people listen in this way, they will not hear what Jesus is saying. Just hearing the words won't change them. Words can go in one ear and out the other.

So, how do we listen in the way Jesus is calling us to listen? How do we listen so that our lives grow into the blessing God has dreamed them to be? Well, in order to really listen, we need to understand why it's so hard to listen. There are at least 4 reasons we have a hard time listening.

1) First, our scripture reading from Samuel begins with the boy Samuel. Samuel is brought to the temple by his mother Hannah. She has been unable to have children. She has made a vow that should she be given the gift of a child, the child would be dedicated to the Lord's service in the temple. And so, Samuel has come to live in the temple with Eli, the high priest.

Eli is like a grandfather to him and loves him deeply. Up to this point, there is no sign of Samuel's prophetic ability. It is also a time when people have lost their faith. We're told: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." Times are difficult. And when times are difficult and we're down about it, it's hard to hear God speak. We lose whatever vision we've had for life and we can't hear any new vision rise up within us. But things can change. For Israel they do change, and Samuel is a big part of that change. But in order for change to be authentic and not just change for change's sake, we need to be able to hear a word from the Lord. How do we distinguish within us a word that is the voice of God from the many voices speaking in our heads all the time?

Samuel must learn discernment as we all must learn discernment. While he is sleeping Samuel hears a voice. The voice is so distinct that Samuel thinks it's someone actually calling him from outside himself. Well, the only other person sleeping at the temple is Eli. It must be him. But it isn't. Eli tells Samuel to go back to bed. This happens a second time with similar results. But the third time it happens is different. Rather than dismiss Samuel, Eli discerns that something else is happening. Samuel is being called to listen. He must learn how to listen. Eli tells Samuel: 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."'

Have you ever done that? Have you ever taken the time to say: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening"? Obviously, we're not talking about audible words. We're talking about making a deliberate and intentional choice to listen to a voice speaking within. What can help us discern such a voice? What spiritual practices can help us? We can think of what we are doing right now in worship as one such practice: worship as an invitation to listen to God speak to us within... worship as an opportunity to discern God speaking over other voices in and around us.

2) So, what does Samuel hear God say? This takes us to a second reason we have a hard time listening. Samuel hears God say: "I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." There are some bad things that are going to happen. For Israel to move forward on a good foundation, the corruption must be cleared out. Eli, the high priest, has put his sons in charge of many things. Israel is a theocracy. The leadership of the nation is a religious leadership. They have used their office for personal gain and they have done some highly unethical things. People have been used and abused. Eli is a good man and a loving father. This has blinded him to some of this corruption and encouraged him to look the other way, making excuses. But no longer. This time is coming to an end. It must come to an end.

Wow. Imagine this young boy Samuel, totally beholden to this grandfather figure and mentor. What is he supposed to do with this kind of revelation and prophecy? Now, it's not

like God just spoke to him audibly. Remember, it's Samuel learning to hear the voice of God within him. The voice of God is the voice of truth, even though such truth is painful and difficult. Samuel has been at the temple long enough to know what Eli's sons have been doing and how Eli has been turning the other way. Israel is on a crooked path and Eli's sons are directly responsible for it. By turning the other way, Eli is complicit in their sin and corruption.

But here's the thing about Eli. He asks Samuel for the truth. He urges Samuel to tell it, whatever it may be. It's almost like Eli knows a day of reckoning has to come. And so, Samuel tells Eli. Eli's whole house will be destroyed, and Eli carries the biggest blame because he carries the biggest responsibility. And how does Eli respond to what he hears? "It is the Lord, let him do what seems good to him."

What's a second reason it's so hard to listen? The truth hurts. We don't want to hear it. We avoid it, rationalize and justify it, anything but having to face it and face what we must do. Eli finally listens to the truth and absorbs it. Tragically, it's too late. The damage has been done. But at least, Eli has his integrity. If he has nothing else left in the end, he has his integrity, and it's that kind of integrity he has taught Samuel.

So then, not only do we have a hard time listening, first, because we are confused and unclear and need to learn how to discern the voice of God from other voices, but second, we have a hard time listening because we don't always want to hear truth. But there's more.

3) In our gospel reading, Jesus calls the first group of disciples – Andrew, Peter, James and John. They are fishermen and Jesus calls them by telling them this: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." We're told that they listened to Jesus. How do we know? Well, they left what they were doing right there and then and followed Jesus. But if we read the rest of the gospel narrative, we will encounter many moments on the journey when the disciples will hear and not hear what Jesus is saying. Why? Because really listening is about change. The disciples must let go something to commit to something else. What in our lives are we being called to let go? What in our lives are we being called to take up and commit to more fully and completely? How do we discern what God is telling us? Are we refusing to really listen because we are afraid of change or afraid of the truth?

And this brings us to the last point and a further reason we have a hard time listening.

4) In the 1990s, one of the greatest stars of the mega church world was Dieter Zander. Zander was pastor of a huge church. He was ultra talented as a preacher, a musician and a best-selling author. He led huge conferences offering advice to thousands of ministers on

how to grow successful churches like his. But in 2008, one night while he was asleep, Dieter had a stroke. When he awoke, his right hand was useless. He couldn't speak. Music and preaching were gone overnight. A successful ministry career and all that went with it ended. Dieter was alone in a body that once served him, but now seemed more like a prison.

A good friend who wanted to help Dieter, gave him a camera, hoping that this creative man could do something meaningful with it. Dieter started taking pictures of everything, trying to tell stories in shape, light, shadow and colour rather than words. To support himself, Dieter got a job as a crossing guard and then at a grocery store, cleaning toilets and stocking shelves.

When asked about his life recently, Dieter had this to say: "Before stroke, I working for God... working, working, working..., Now I playing with God, playing, playing, playing... much better." After everything he had lost it would be so easy for him to get lost in grief and bitterness, and yet, something else happened. What was it? Dieter tells the story of how one day when he was alone cleaning a urinal, he heard a voice deep within him. The voice said: "urinal holy, toilet holy, bathroom holy, grocery store holy, everything holy." He heard these words as a revelation from God. These words awoke in him something powerful and liberating... Since that life-changing revelation, Dieter claims that "instead of playing God, I'm playing with God, at play in God's good world, where everything is holy."

So, why is it that we, like the earlier version of Dieter, cannot hear God speak to us? Maybe, we haven't learned how to discern God's voice from many other voices in and around us. Or, maybe we can't hear God speaking to us because we are shutting our inner ears to some truth we don't want to hear or face. Or maybe God's voice is muffled if not silent in us because we are afraid to let go something or we are not prepared to commit to something new or something in a new way. Or, maybe we are unable to hear God speaking because we have disabled our inner voice which allows us to hear God speaking to us all the time. As Dieter would say: God is everywhere and speaking all the time. The question for us is: will we take up practices and orient our lives so that we cultivate a deeper listening? We must choose such a direction. We must choose to listen and develop our spiritual listening skills until, like Dieter, we hear God speaking to us continually.

So then, will you? Will you choose to listen today?.. Let us pray: Speak to us, O Lord... for your servants are listening... Amen.