

HEARING GOD SPEAK

1 Samuel 3: 1-18

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. It's about taking something seriously that's happening, requiring attention and change.

But listening is also a spiritual thing. After our scripture reading during worship, we speak the words responsively: "We are listening, O God; **Speak to us!**" So what are we listening for? How do we know it's God speaking and not our wishful thinking? Let's delve into our scripture reading for some revelatory insight.

Eli is the high priest. In a time before kings, Eli is the top official of the people of Israel. But Eli is also a humble man with a troubled family. His sons are supposed to succeed him, but they are disreputable and corrupt, and Eli carries failure and remorse about it. There is a bright spot, though – Samuel. Samuel is just a boy, but already Eli can see something in him. Samuel was left under Eli's charge after his mother Hannah brought him to the temple. She had been unable to bear children for years for all her praying about it. But she made a vow to God. Should she become pregnant and bear a child, she would devote the child to the service of the Lord in the temple. This child was Samuel. She kept her vow. Eli was given charge of Samuel, to raise him and teach him.

And now we get to our reading. It begins with these words: “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” In other words, it was a time where people had lost hope, a time of despair. It was a time where there were no new ideas, no new doors opening, no hope for better days and better ways. To hear God speak we have to believe God can speak and we have to believe we can hear God speaking. To hear God speak is to believe that we can receive visions and revelations. The question for you and me, as it is the question for Israel, Eli and Samuel is this: Are we unable to hear God speak because something has shut down in us? Have we given up because a door has closed? Are we so burdened by something or disillusioned by something or distressed about something or taken up and distracted by any number of things that we cannot hear God speaking to us ways and means for what our lives can yet become? What is it in you and me that may be blocking our hearing of God speaking to us?

And this leads to our second point. Eli is awakened. Samuel thinks Eli is calling him. He claims he’s hearing some voice. But Eli hasn’t called him. It’s only the two of them there through the night. If it’s not Eli calling Samuel who could it be? Whether Samuel is dreaming or not, some vision is being spoken to him, some word, and it isn’t Eli speaking. And so, Eli tells Samuel this: “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” In other words, Samuel is being taught to listen. Eli believes God can speak. He is being recalled to a time when God would speak and people were open and ready to hear. Samuel has a child-like openness to listen and learn. He is not shut down like many adults, jaded by repeated disappointment, cynical, mistrusting or too skeptical to listen for some transcendent word to be spoken into the depths of their hearts.

So, what about you and me? Are we open and child-like like Samuel, ready to hear a word from beyond us, a word spoken into the depths of our hearts, a word to enlighten, challenge, direct and move us? Or, are we blocked from hearing for some reason? Are we jaded, cynical or shut down because life has overwhelmed, disappointed or betrayed us somehow? Are we so distracted that we cannot settle our minds and focus our inner selves so that we may discern a word from beyond us spoken into us? Are we so resistant to change that we refuse to hear because we’re afraid of the call to change?

Well, this leads to our third and final point. Samuel is open and ready to learn from Eli. He is child-like in his readiness to trust and he is open in that part of his brain where spiritual imagination thrives. God can speak to us, we can learn to hear. Regardless of all that happens in life to make us question ourselves, question life, question others and question the very existence of God, we attune ourselves again and again and open ourselves again and again.

But, there are blocks in life. There are reasons why our trust and imagination has shut down. Life has dealt various blows and disappointments our way. People have betrayed us. Our vulnerability has been taken advantage of and abused rather than cared for. Any number of reasons visible and invisible to us are reasons why our spiritual imagination and openness has broken down, if it was ever there. But I believe it is there, for why else would you be here. Coming to church is about opening ourselves up to the possibility that God speaks and that we may hear something and identify it as a divine word spoken into the depths of our hearts. We come here to practice that kind of spiritual hearing. We come so that we may develop some familiarity with that voice; a learning through Jesus of what that voice would and would not say.

But there's still one more challenge, a big challenge for us if we are going to hear a voice that is authentic and not just made up to suit our every want rather than our deeper need. There is still one more challenge.

Samuel hears the voice again. This time, he knows what he will say: 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' And then, Samuel hears something. But here's the thing. What Samuel hears is not what he wants to hear. We read: "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.'" In other words: 'there's some bad stuff going on, Samuel, and there's going to be some consequences and some accountability for it all. There has to be and you need to speak it on my behalf. You need to live it on my behalf if you're going to live truthfully in yourself and speak truthfully to others because you really care about them.'

And there is more content to what Samuel hears. Basically, the corruption and abuse of the office of high priest that Eli's sons have been perpetrating will lead to ruin for Eli's whole house. Eli is a good and righteous man. But he has not had the courage to confront his sons and clean house, and for this reason, he will fall along with his sons and another lineage will take over the leadership of Israel... Wow! Pretty awful isn't it. Sad and tragic for Eli. Even though his sons deserve to fail and fall, the pain a father carries will overwhelm him. How many things we carry, don't we, because we are connected to family who are both our greatest blessing and our greatest burden and sometimes our failure too.

So, does Samuel hold back and refuse to hear what God is saying even if it's totally true. He loves Eli. Eli is like a father to him. Eli has taken him in and taught him everything. Eli loves him like his own and has held nothing back from Samuel. Does Samuel reward all that goodness and love by speaking such a damning word even if it's the truth?

Well, we're not left guessing in this story. Eli asks Samuel to tell him what he's heard. Samuel finds the courage to speak it exactly as he's heard it in his heart. And Eli? Does he get angry

and condemn Samuel and throw him out? Does he make excuses and justifications like he's probably been making to himself all these years, avoiding having to confront his sons and deal with their evil? No. After Eli hears it all – the sad, tragic hard truth - he says this: 'It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.' In other words, he affirms that what Samuel has heard is God speaking. Eli has heard the same thing but has refused to hear it all these years. Now he hears it from a mere boy, but a boy who has been exposed to Eli's household and has observed all that's been happening. He hears God speak the truth he's been avoiding. No longer.

So how does it happen for you and me? How do we get to that point where we hear God speak to us not necessarily what we simply want to hear, but what we truly need to hear, some deeper truth, something that will require some change, some action, some commitment and direction? We can keep avoiding, denying, just living our life as we want it, shutting down things of conscience and our spiritual imagination. Or we can really recover a child-like openness to hear again. What would that look like for you, for me? Where are the obstacles in your life, in mine? Where are the distractions? Where is the lack of commitment? Where is the lack of faith that a divine word can be spoken and we can act on it even when change is required?

We have witnessed a baptism today. We have called on the Holy Spirit to surround and penetrate James as he continues his journey to adulthood. We have added our prayers for him and his family. Our hope is that he will learn to hear God speaking just like Samuel was taught. The truth is what we need to hear even if it's not always what we want to hear. God's vision for us is always the same: How can our lives bless the world in a unique way as followers of Jesus? That's what we're here for. But we have to learn to hear in order to know our way forward at each stage of life... We are listening, O God; **Speak to us!**
Amen.