

Tell Us Plainly
1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 10:22-30
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When we are children, there are certain stories from the Bible that really reach out and grab us. For some of us, these are among the first stories we hear, tales of God descending to Earth and interacting with humanity in unfamiliar and mesmerizing ways. There are a ton of stories that fit this description: the creation myths of Eden and Noah, the saga of Moses in Exodus, the morality tale of Jonah, and the birth and life of Jesus, among others. In fact, there are so many stories like this that I suspect most of us aren't grabbed by all of them, just by one or two that struck us cleanly at just the right time in our lives.

For me, one of the stories that did this was the Old Testament reading from this morning, the story of a voice calling out to Samuel in the night. My dad once did a painting of Samuel kneeling by his bed praying, answering the voice in the night that had called out his name. Samuel's face looks so earnest in this painting, quizzical and curious, peaceful and yet anxious, believing but unbelieving. More than anything, the Samuel in this painting is listening. That painting hung next to my bed for twenty years until I moved it into the girls' room.

The thought of a divine voice calling out to us in the night is terrifying but enchanting. It is also extraordinarily relatable. For me as a child, it was hard to picture living on a boat or getting swallowed by a fish, or even watching a baby in a manger. But lying in bed in the still of the night and hearing a voice? That actually seemed like it could happen.

Of course, just because it seemed like it could happen doesn't mean that I thought it would happen. As a child, I didn't know anyone who said they had heard the voice of God while lying in bed, and I suspect that—particularly as a youth—I might have been suspicious of anyone who claimed such a thing. Even the scripture from today starts off by telling us that “visions were not widespread.” Voices in the dark don't happen every night.

Some might say that, today, they don't really happen at all. One of the questions I used to get from my youth on a semi-regular basis was, “Why doesn't God speak to us now the same way that God spoke to people in the Bible?” There are a lot of ways to answer that question, ranging from an examination of biblical hermeneutics to a changing theology and understanding of God, but perhaps the clearest and best answer is a simple, “Maybe God still does.”

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Returning to the scripture from 1st Samuel: this is a story where God seems to speak in a clear, easy to understand voice, a voice that grips the boy Samuel in the night and (eventually) issues to him a distinct message. When we think about “God speaking to people in the Bible,” this is the kind of thing we think about—God having actual conversations with human beings, in an intelligible voice that echoes in human ears and cannot be denied. This feels like a story where it is easy for a human, Samuel, to understand God.

Except that, even though on the surface it looks like Samuel has no trouble hearing the voice of God, it takes God four times of calling out before Samuel answers. The first three times Samuel doesn't get it—doesn't recognize the voice, doesn't have the ability to respond in conversation. He hears his name, but he doesn't hear God, not those first three times. Despite how it seems to us as readers, it's difficult for Samuel to hear the voice of God.

It takes the priest Eli before Samuel is able to hear God's voice. It's Eli who determines that this is God talking and gives Samuel the nudge that the boy needs. It turns out God has a message for Eli, not for Samuel. We didn't continue our reading to the rest of the story in 1st Samuel this morning, but the following verses tell us God's message is about Eli and his family, not about Samuel at all. It's Eli who needs to hear this message.

This isn't actually a story about Samuel hearing the voice of God. It's a story about Eli hearing the voice of God.

Eli has to rely on a young, shy boy who doesn't want to share what God has spoken. Eli has somehow displeased God and has to hear a troubling message instead of an affirming one. Despite all of this, Eli manages to hear God's message through Samuel. If it was difficult for Samuel to hear God speak, it was even more difficult for Eli.

The question probably shouldn't be, "Why doesn't God speak to us the way God spoke to people in the Bible?" The question probably should be, "How can we listen like Eli listened?"

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Eli—and for that matter, Samuel—have several things going for them when they listen for God's voice in the temple in today's scripture. The first is that God comes to them in the dead of the night, when the world is still and quiet and distractions are at bay. I have no idea how hard or easy it was for Eli and Samuel to be alert in the still of the night—to make room for the voice of God to descend—but the world we currently live in isn't exactly conducive to stillness. Even when we lie down at night, there are a million things running through our minds, the noise of the day continuing to shout at us until sleep drowns it out. It is difficult to hear God's voice when we give priority to the noise of our lives. Eli and Samuel have managed to clear space in their minds, in their worlds, and God takes advantage of the opportunity.

But even beyond the timing and setting of God's speaking, Samuel and Eli are extremely patient listeners. Eli, in particular, demonstrates this patience first with Samuel, never once brushing away or snapping at the boy who awakens him in the middle of the night over and over again. Instead, he waits and works with Samuel, patiently, until the two of them can figure out what's going on. Eli is similarly patient with God, refusing to get worked up about the fact that God is speaking to someone in the room next door. Eli doesn't try to eavesdrop on the conversation or rush Samuel to share details. He is able to hear what God has to say because he's willing to be patient with God. Perhaps most importantly, he is patient with himself, giving himself grace to figure things out. He recognizes that he is human.

Just because Eli is patient does not mean that he is passive. His instructions to Samuel are clear and assertive. The next morning, he will be adamant with Samuel about sharing the message God has delivered. Being a good listener is more than just sitting back and waiting for someone else to talk. It's urging them to speak when they have something they must share. It's creating an environment where they're willing to do so. Eli demonstrates this.

When I was in college, I worked for a while with an autistic boy named Grey. One of the quirks of Grey's speaking was that he would ask a question when he meant to make a statement, not just changing the word order but also altering his inflection. He'd say, "Is that a taxi?" when what he really meant was, "Look! There's a taxi!" It took me a while to learn how to understand him. I had to learn to listen beneath the words, to focus on the essence of what he was saying, to hear what he meant and not just what he said.

The first time that Samuel comes to Eli and says, "Here I am, you called me," that's probably what he meant. And maybe the second time, too. But by the third time, I've got to believe that Samuel knows that it's not Eli who is calling him. Even though he may say, "Here I am, you called me," what he really means sounds more like, "I keep hearing this voice and I don't know what to do about it. Please help me!" Because Eli is a really good listener, even half asleep, he listens beneath the words. He is able to understand the essence of what Samuel is saying. Because he is a really good listener—patient but assertive, in the still of the night—Eli is *also* able to hear the voice of God.

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Today's gospel reading, which I'm sure you thought I'd completely forgotten about, is also about people trying to hear the voice of God. In this passage from John, an unidentified group of Jews asks Jesus, "How long will you keep us in suspense?" before pleading with him, "Tell us plainly." It sounds like an innocent enough question, the same kind of question that my youth would have asked. "In suspense" suggests that these particular Jews have been following Jesus for some time, likely waiting for distinct guidance in the midst of his teaching. Like the disciples in numerous passages we've looked at recently, these Jews want certainty, clarity, and plainness. They want to have things laid out on the table without any doubt.

The Jews ask this question before Jesus' death and resurrection, but it is the question of Easter: "Jesus, now that you are going from our Earth, how will we understand you clearly? When you are not here, will you speak to us plainly?" This is the question of followers wondering about the future.

The Greek in today's passage, however, is a little fuzzy, and it is possible to translate the Jews' question in a slightly different way. Instead of asking, "How long will you keep us in suspense?" it is possible they are asking, "How long will you annoy us to pieces?" This puts a completely different spin on things, suggesting that these Jews are not admirers of Jesus but rather adversaries who seek to take him down.¹

Jesus' response, fittingly, is equally unclear. He could be saying compassionately, "You do not believe," pitying his followers and wishing that they could understand all that he has shared with them. This is, again, the same tenor he has adopted with his disciples. Or he could be dismissing the attacks of his enemies with clever rhetoric, saying accusingly, "the problem here is that you do not believe," the same way he has done with scribes and Pharisees. Just as it's hard to know what the Jews are saying, it's unclear how Jesus is responding.

¹ Thomas Troeger, "Fourth Sunday of Easter," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2* ed. by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 445.

What is clear is this: the Jews are expecting Jesus to speak to them plainly about things that are not plain. They are expecting a law that is ironclad and straightforward, something like “an eye for an eye,” always. They are expecting Jesus to confirm outright that he is the Messiah, but their expectations of what the Messiah is make it impossible for Jesus to do that, because he is a very different kind of Messiah than the one they’ve been waiting for.

We are also unable to talk plainly about the things of God because the things of God are not plain. When someone begins speaking with unequivocal certainty about God, that is actually a sign that this person is no longer speaking about God. God—God’s miracles, God’s teachings, God’s way in our world, all of it—is simply too much for us to comprehend and articulate plainly. Or, as Episcopal rector Gary Jones puts it, “God grasps us; we do not grasp God.”²

This is why Jesus teaches so much to us through actions. Words alone do not make a sufficient explanation. Even when he uses words, they are often parables or metaphors—again, because the things of God do not fit into straightforward language. And so the humans remain in suspense, or in frustration, or both.

Whether they are confused devotees or schemers trying to trap Jesus, these Jews are trying to grasp God instead of allowing God to grasp them...and that’s their mistake. Jesus, not surprisingly, turns the problem back on those asking the question. The problem is not that Jesus has failed to communicate to this group of Jews; the problem is that they do not believe, and because they do not believe, they cannot understand him when he tells them plainly that he is the Messiah.

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In the end, it is a mistake to expect Jesus, or God, to speak to us plainly. The truths that God will convey to us—the messages that God has for us—are either too magnificently impressive or too wondrously complex for us to expect them to arrive plainly. Our God is many things, but ordinary is not one of them.

In the end, it is also a mistake to expect God to speak to us in a clear voice. The scriptures suggest that even when this happens, we are often too busy, or too naïve, or too afraid, or simply too human to comprehend it. Rarely—very rarely—we will find ourselves in a situation where the setting is perfect, there is a wise leader in the next room who can calm us down and give us direction, and through an inexplicable blend of patience and assertiveness, we will hear that voice. But, just as in 1st Samuel, in our day the audible word of the Lord remains rare.

As I have grown, I’ve once or twice come across prophets who speak calmly with conviction about the times they have encountered the voice of God. They share stories humbly and reluctantly where they have nothing to gain from the sharing, and their testimonies feel authentic. But to expect the voice of God to arrive—to presume to command its appearance—is foolish at best and blasphemous at worst.

What we can expect, what we can ask, is how to be better prepared for the moments when God does speak to us, whether that is through a clear voice in the night, through a message delivered by a small child, through acts of kindness, or through the parables of scripture. What we can focus on is how to be still, to be patient, to be assertive, to surround ourselves with those who will help us listen, and (maybe most importantly) to believe that God does still want to speak to us... even to speak to us plainly.

² Gary D. Jones, “Fourth Sunday of Easter,” *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2* ed. by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 444.