

God's Call in Your Life: "Speak, Lord. I'm Listening"¹

St. Martin's Church

January 17, 2021

I

The Word of the Lord is rare today ... at least some might say that. I mean, congressional dithering or worse, churches torn apart over everything from what you should think about gender issues and such ... to what color the carpet should be ... war and terror and death all around ... oh, the Word of the Lord does seem rare indeed in our day!

Do you ever lie awake at night ... when darkness makes benign things seem bad and bad things much, much worse? Where you hear these voices in your head – voices that rarely have anything good to say to you? I mean at four in the morning, things I don't understand crowd in on me – the meaning of life, the meaning of suffering, the fate of our world seemingly caught in a tightening vise of evil – wondering where God is and what God thinks about the cruelty and the stupidity of us humans ... what God thinks about the many mistakes I've also made ... you've made. ...

Well, if you think your own bed's scary, sometimes in the deep of the night ... imagine poor Samuel sleeping in the temple next to the ark of God. Just think of the terror he must have felt when he heard that mysterious voice ... that summons calling to him out of the deep dark.

II

Now do you know Samuel's whole story? See, he was born to Hannah, who thought she was barren. And so she prayed and prayed in the temple of Shiloh for a son. And she promised this son to God if he were only born. Well, turns out the old temple priest Eli overheard her prayer and blessed her. And when Samuel was then born, Hannah kept her word to God and brought her baby to the Shiloh temple and left him there ... left him to serve the old priest Eli, now blind ... left Samuel to grow up tending to both Eli and tending to the altar. A sort-of house boy in the temple of God. And then one night ... someone does call out, "Samuel, Samuel." Calls once and then again and again, and each time Samuel answers, "Here I am. Here I am." And then he runs to Eli to find out why Eli's calling. And Eli sends him away, saying, "I did not call; go, lie down again."

But by the third time Samuel runs into Eli's room to answer his call, the old man begins to guess that someone is really calling to Samuel – but who? Some ... He ... Someone ... so he says to Samuel, "If 'he' should call again, answer, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

And 'course, we know from the story that that's just what Samuel did. And you know something? I mean, here's the scary thing: With that response, Samuel's whole life pivoted ... 'cause in that moment,

Samuel became God's servant, became a man, became ... no longer a houseboy of the temple, but a servant – a prophet – of God.

But here's the thing. I also think – in this pivotal point – Samuel's readiness to hear had to take real courage. 'Cause part of what he heard that night from out of the darkness were words that absolutely condemned old Eli and his whole household. See, Eli's sons had become corrupt priests of the temple – stealing sacrificial meat, carousing with women who came to the temple to pray. Oh, Eli had warned them and warned them ... but Eli was weak. Very weak. And now the bill had come due.

But you know, I bet Samuel wishes he hadn't heard what he's heard: that the house of Eli would be crushed and would be no more. Maybe ... he'd like to just run from the voice that called out to him, maybe wants to go back to the safety of just being a houseboy, where his life has been simple and known.

But Eli knows ... hearing the call the third time ... knows in his old bones that Someone had come in the night. And so he demands to know. "What did he tell you? What'd he say?" See, I think Eli knows Someone has called Samuel. But I also think he wants to hear the message before he decides just who it is that has called into Samuel's life. So Eli demands to know: What did he say?

So Samuel answers, "The Voice ... He said ... you have been warned and warned ... and you have done nothing. And now it's too late. Your house will be torn down and will never rise again." So Eli hears this bone-rattling judgment and then he knows. And says, "It is the Lord. Let Him do what seems good to Him."

And so the scene fades.

III

Well. So here's a question: Does anyone really want to hear the voice of the living God? I wonder. But then ... I wonder which is worse: to hear that Voice in the middle of the night, or not to hear it – to hear nothing but silence instead. And I also wonder this: I wonder if all the fears that crowd my brain at 4 a.m. are my way to avoid saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Well, let's think here a minute. 'Cause I believe one true nugget from this morning's story is this. And that is: If you listen hard enough and long enough, then God will speak eventually ... maybe not audibly, but God will speak. 'Cause since the beginning of time and then through the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, God has been speaking to you and me ... and is speaking to us still.

See, His words – sometimes His hard words – come to you in your person, come in your body, come in all the events of your life ... if only you can learn to hear what they're telling you. So as Scripture says, "in the year King Uzziah died," or in the year Martin Luther King Jr. died ... or in the year that somebody you love dies ... you hide your face in the temple of your hands ... and then a voice says, "Who shall I send into the pain of this world?" And like Samuel here, if you're not careful, you may find yourself answering, "Send me." And so your life pivots ... has a new beginning and a new direction.

Now, someone's said that a new beginning can mean a terrible ending – a terrible ending of some other arrangements ... that can require you to face candidly all that's changed, all maybe that's failed. Yeah, a new beginning – like Samuel's – can mean a painful cutting off from the past in order to move forward into the call of a new day. And then you may hear that voice say, "Go." Just go!

Now getting to the main point here, I bet your life is full of all sorts of voices calling you in all sorts of directions. Some of them are voices from inside you. And some of them are voices from outside. But underneath all of that, way down at the core of your life, is the voice of God.

So here's a question: How do you know which voice to listen to? Which voice to answer? Well, let's try this. Let's try this: Someone said that your call – God's call in your life – that call is heard where your greatest gladness meets the world's greatest needs – or at least your neighbor's needs, or your friend's needs, or the needs of that lost soul across town or across the street. Your own call ... is where your own deepest gladness meets these other needs.

And see, I do believe that if you keep your eyes and ears wide open, you will find that place of purpose and joy. And you know what? There's nothing sentimental about this truth. It means simply that you must be careful with your life, for Christ's sake. Because it would seem that this is the only life you're going to get in this puzzling, perilous world. And so your life is very precious. And what you do with it matters enormously.

Well, everybody knows that, right? I mean, no one needs to tell you that! But maybe ... in another way ... maybe you do always need to be told that. 'Cause I think there's always the temptation to believe that you have all the time in the world. But the truth of it is that you do not. You have only one life. And so in the end ... the choice of how you're going to live it must be yours, as you struggle to hear God's call in all the messiness of your life.

Finally, let me end with this: Though we live in a time when God's voice is rarely heard, I believe that you are surrounded by the presence of God ... our God who calls you still. What is God trying, wanting, longing to say to you? Oh, His message is different for each of you ... as different as our own individual lives. Only our beginnings are the same ... our first tiny steps toward finding out ... when you're able to summon up all your courage, open your mouth, and say: "Speak, Lord, speak. I'm listening."

Amen.

1. Resources used: Mixed Blessings ("Voices in the Night") by Barbara Brown Taylor; First and Second Samuel by Walter Brueggemann (Interpretation Series); Synthesis for January 17, 2021.