



Lynnae Douglas' Sermon

JANUARY 17, 2021

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” With these words on his lips, young Samuel stands in the tabernacle at Shiloh before the God of all the universe who has come to speak to him, and his life is turned upside down. Actually the whole nation of Israel is redirected and set on a different course. An ordinary, ignorant young boy is taught by an old priest named Eli to hear and perceive the voice of God.

At this point in Israel’s history, as the first verse of our reading tells us, the word of the Lord was rare, there were no frequent visions. God wasn’t revealing himself as often or as obviously. The Israelites sense of hearing had become deadened by sin. The Old Testament book of Judges records the history which leads up to what we receive in 1 Samuel. Judges ends with societal disintegration and moral decay. The two often go hand in hand, as we know well. We are living in a similar time. Our culture actually promotes what the book of Judges warns against when it ends with these words: “Everyone was doing that which was right in their own eyes.” To use Paul’s language from our epistle reading, the Israelites were under the impression that their bodies were their own private possession, not gifts given to them by God. This moral decline continues on into 1 Samuel with the elderly priest Eli’s household. Eli’s two sons were called to fulfill priestly duties alongside their father in the temple at Shiloh. Instead, the young men profaned the priestly office by their pride and greed and sexual immorality. The very people who were meant to uphold the word of the Lord were scorning it, using it as leverage for personal gain. Then a young boy no one had ever heard of comes on the scene, and suddenly God breaks into Israel’s sorry state. And the way that he breaks in is with a word: the LORD speaks.

How does God speak to us? Does God still speak audibly like he did to Samuel? Does God speak to each one of us privately, in our own heads or in our hearts? How do I know when the Lord is speaking? There has been much confusion surrounding these questions since Christ was raised from the dead, and in 21st century American Christianity, the confusion abounds. As a young girl growing up in an independent-Baptist tradition, I can remember many times wondering how and where and when I would hear from God. I was of course taught to listen for his voice through the Scriptures, but on my own, those Scriptures were pretty difficult to understand. The stories and teachings of the Bible are not given to us to be a matter of our own private interpretation, nor are we meant to “hear from God” with our own personal feelings or preferences guiding our listening. God never simply becomes one of the voices in our head. He isn’t a new feeling that we have inside of us, or a new way of thinking. I should quickly add that I am in no way suggesting we shouldn’t read the Scriptures on our own. In fact, I’m deeply grateful I was taught that habit as a young girl. My point is that whether we are by ourselves or gathered here in church, we are meant to hear from God outside of ourselves and within a particular context, a community. In a certain sense, we hear God in the same way that we hear anyone else: by being present with him. I don’t listen for the voice of one of my sons by closing my eyes and ears and looking within me. When I’m being attentive anyway, I come to them and listen to them. God comes to us from outside of us, and he has promised to be present where we gather in his name.

Young Samuel also didn't know how to recognize God's voice. He heard his name being called, more than once, and it was so clear that it actually woke him from sleep. The voice was not a figment of his imagination; it was an external, understandable voice. Samuel didn't know it was God's voice yet, but he knew that it was a real voice, and that it came from outside of him. He runs to Eli his teacher a few times, and Eli at first tells the silly boy to go back to bed. But then on the fourth time, by God's grace, Eli perceived it was the LORD and instructed Samuel in his response. He gave Samuel a script to say, much like we are given when we hear, "the word of the Lord," and respond with, "thanks be to God." Samuel needed guidance before he could know who was addressing him. He was graciously given this guidance within a particular context, a community. And it was actually his mother Hannah who was first to give Samuel the opportunity to hear God speak.

We often don't hear a whole lot about women in the Bible, so I want to take a few moments to recall Hannah's story from the opening chapter of 1 Samuel. Hannah is an ordinary woman, not famous in Israel or assigned any momentous tasks by God. She lived in a small corner of the earth, and rather unexpectedly, her story involves deep sorrow and depression. Hannah had no children, and becoming a mother was the greatest longing of her heart. Her husband Elkanah loved her very much, but even his love didn't ultimately satisfy Hannah. Problematically it was common in those days for men to have more than one wife, and Elkanah's second wife who had many children tormented Hannah day by day and year after year, to the point where Hannah didn't even want to eat.

On one annual trip to the temple or tabernacle in Shiloh, Hannah "poured out her soul" before the Lord. 1 Samuel 1:10 says, "she was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly." She wept bitterly. Not the typical description of a saint. Hannah cried out to God, acknowledging that she was powerless to open the door to her closed womb. She trusted, through her tears, that he alone could bring life from barrenness. So she begged God, probably too many times to count, for a son. She even vowed to God that if he gave her a son, she would offer her baby boy right back to God, to serve God in his temple all the days of his life.

Eli, the priest in charge, saw Hannah praying, and as she was speaking to God in her heart, he assumed she was drunk. She was mouthing prayers to God, not speaking out loud in the conventional way. Hannah didn't come to the temple at Shiloh all put together, looking her Sunday best. In a word, she was a mess! Eli rebuked her and took her to be a drunkard. But even there, Hannah rose with courage and didn't allow his words to deflate or silence her. She boldly told him what she had come there to ask of God, and by her faith and courage, Eli's heart was softened. He prayed on behalf of Hannah, and shortly thereafter discovered she was pregnant with baby Samuel.

Because of God's call and Hannah's obedient participation in his plan, Samuel was in the right place at the right time to hear the voice of God. Hannah entrusted Samuel to the Lord and passed on her faith to her miraculously-born son. She provided him with the context in which he would hear God's voice. Samuel of course still needed guidance from Eli to help him discern what was happening. But he wouldn't have been there at all if it wasn't for the faithfulness of his mother, and even the faithfulness of his father who was devoted to bringing his family to worship God there at Shiloh.

The message Samuel received from God comes later on in the story, but suffice it to say, it was not an easy one for him prophesy. He was called to proclaim the devastating consequences that resulted from the sins of Eli's sons and even on account of Eli's negligence as a father. But God gave Samuel courage, this time through Eli himself, to receive the message and trust that it was still good. Big, sweeping things began to change in Israel when Samuel was made a prophet. Samuel's divinely-appointed birth was the

start of a great re-birth in Israel. He was called to be the first prophet in Israel, he anointed King David, and through this line, Christ the Messiah-King would come. He too would be miraculously born, not from a barren womb but through a virgin's. Christ would be the Prophet and Priest greater than Samuel, saying without delay and throughout his whole life: "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." Jesus would be the only Human to listen perfectly and attentively to the voice of his Father for our sake, and in our human flesh, he would reveal that God's Word becomes irreversibly human, eternally and temporally audible and visible. In our weekly liturgy, we still hear him speak to us week after week, through the lectors and those following Jesus by leading us in worship. Then we all head in the same direction, toward the altar, as we see his Word visibly and receive him through bread and wine. As Samuel assured little Eli that the word of the Lord was good, we too are invited to come and taste and see that the Lord is good.

As Pastor Ken mentioned, this is the last time that I have the privilege to step into your pulpit, at least as your intern who you have so graciously called. I have seen Christ in you and my family and I have been so blessed by his love that pours out from this congregation. My final encouragement to you is this: do not forsake your call as a church family to hear God speak together—no one is meant to hear him entirely on their own. As I said earlier, we are meant to hear God's voice from outside of ourselves and within a particular context, a community. You have right here in this church family the gift of that particular context, a wonderful community. Calvary you are a people who have been given the gift of faith, you have heard the truth that God knows you and loves you, that before any of you were under the fig tree or even in your mothers' wombs, God knew you and desired to speak to you. Continue to avail yourselves of opportunities to hear him speak to you together. Continue to share your lives with one another, just as I have seen you doing throughout a very difficult year. Continue to minister the words of Scripture to each other in your joys and sorrows. Continue to offer the hope within you to your children and your children's children.

Rebirth can happen in our day too, not because we have something great to offer to God, but because he has already offered his most precious gift to us. God alone can bring life out of barrenness. By his powerful Word, he will accomplish great things through even small communities like this one. And these great and mighty things often begin in unexpected ways through ordinary people gathered together as one body: through mothers like Hannah and friends like Andrew and Philip, through weary old men who stumbled like Eli, through young boys like Samuel and young girls like Mary. You are a family, Calvary Lutheran Church, chosen by God and gathered by his Spirit so that you can hear God's voice and respond together: "Speak Lord, for your servants are listening." And from here, your lives are formed and patterned so that even as you are going about your average, Monday through Friday lives, you find yourselves repeating these same words, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening" as you seek the Lord where he promises to be found.

Listening will not be easy. Billions of dollars are spent every year to keep us distracted, to ensure our attention spans are ever-decreasing. Satan is also a present reality and he constantly tempts us to believe the lies that God is silent, he will not come to us, there is no hope or salvation for us in Jesus. Beside this, we may not always immediately "like" what God has to say—Samuel sure didn't. But you are not walking by faith on your own. You have fellow brothers and sisters sitting beside you, naming the lies with you and reminding you that God's Word is always for your good. You have a faithful and discerning pastor who is committed to guiding you to hear and receive God's grace and truth. And your Lord and Savior promises to go on sharing with this whole body the same power and strength that raised him from the dead. Jesus, who will never return to his grave, is raised and present with us, and through this bread and wine, he tells us again that our sins are forgiven, that he is forming us into his own body, and not even the gates of hell will prevail against his church. To our triune God alone who is able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless before the presence of his glory with great joy, be all honor and power and authority, now and forever. Amen.