

Are You Listening? 1 Samuel 3: 1-10 Pastor Emily Miller, August 24, 2014

Our scripture for this morning is a good one – a story from the Old Testament Book of First Samuel that tells us about the very beginning of the ministry of the prophet Samuel. We call this “the call of Samuel.” Samuel was an amazing prophet who anointed the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David. At the time of this story from Samuel’s youth, scripture tells us that God wasn’t talking to the people very much, but when he does decide to speak, Samuel has a little bit of trouble hearing Him.

Read 1 Samuel 3:1-10. Pray.

I’ve always been a regular church attender my whole life, and I have been so blessed to have numerous fine pastors who contributed to my Christian upbringing. When I was a young child, my mother would take me to church to attend the 11:00 service on a regular basis. It was a traditional Presbyterian service, with a traditional Presbyterian preacher, whose name was Dr. Richard Cromie.

Dr. Cromie was a large Scotch/Irish man with fiery red hair and he delivered excellent sermons. But, as a kid, I really didn’t appreciate his oratory skills. In fact, I used to get quite bored during the sermons. (I know none of you can identify with that). My mind would wander off to think about the things kids think about – what would I have for lunch? Would I ride my bike that afternoon? Would my friends be around to play with me? And things of that nature.

So, Dr. Cromie is up there preaching away and my mind is going further and further away and he would get to a point in his sermon when he would stop, lean way down into the microphone, and in his booming masculine voice, he would say, “Are you listening? Are you listening?” Every single time he did that I would jump about a foot out of my pew and I would always think he was speaking directly to me. Oh my goodness, Dr. Cromie knew that I was thinking about lunch, he knew I wasn’t paying attention. He was speaking directly to me when he said, “Are you listening?”

Dr. Cromie was so well known for that phrase that when he left my home church and moved to Florida for his next call, he got his own radio ministry in Florida which was called, you guessed it, “Are you listening?” Dr. Cromie passed away about 6 months ago, but his legacy lives on in my heart for sure and I will always remember his question that rang in my ears as a youth – Are You Listening?

In our scripture for today, young Samuel has lots of trouble listening. Samuel lives in the temple with the old priest Eli and Jewish tradition has it that he is about 12 years old when this story takes place. He's trying to sleep one night when he hears a voice calling his name, "Samuel!" in the middle of the night. He jumps out of bed and runs to Eli assuming it's Eli calling to him, but Eli denies calling to him at all. Samuel goes back to sleep and is awakened a second time by the same sound, "Samuel! Samuel!" And again, Eli says, "Nope, it's not me." Samuel goes back to bed and is awakened a third time by the same voice crying, "Samuel, Samuel!"

Thankfully, the wise old Eli catches on and realizes that God is calling Samuel, so he tells Samuel what to do. The next time it happens, "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel sits up and responds, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." And so begins one of the greatest ministries in the Bible – a prophetic ministry that leads Samuel to listen to God for the rest of his life and to anoint two kings – Saul: an unsuccessful king who doesn't listen to God, and David: the greatest king of Israel who ever lived.

Listening for God is a tough thing to do sometimes.

Although it is tough, there are several things that we can learn from this story to apply to our lives about listening to God. The first is that God is indeed speaking to the world that he created. He spoke to Samuel and he will speak to us. Listening in itself involves an expectation that God will speak.

Nowadays, it seems to be increasingly difficult to listen to God. Even if you start your day with the best of intentions, there are so many other voices that we hear from sun up to sun down that get in the way. In any given day, how many different voices do you hear? Your radio wakes you up with the news of the day; the morning TV anchors tell you about traffic jams and rain storms coming; your spouse tells you what to pick up at the grocery store or what the children need from you that afternoon; your boss gives you some important task to keep the company running; your friend tells you about a problem in her life. All of these are good voices, necessary voices, but they occupy our ears and our minds and our hearts so much that God's voice is often drowned out by it all.

Scripture tells us that God's voice is a still small voice, the voice that spoke to Elijah on the mountain after the loud storm had passed. Scripture tells us that God's voice is

heard often in the quiet of our dreams, as it was for Joseph in the New Testament when God told him not to leave Mary but to take her as his wife and raise Jesus as his son.

Scripture tells us that God can call to us in the middle of the night, wake us up at a time when everything is quite and still, but we need to be listening. We need to listen so that we will not mistake God's voice from all the others we hear. Are we listening?

The second thing to keep in mind when listening for God is that we need to decipher what is God's voice and what is not. This also can be a tough thing to do. I'm going to run the risk of being too political here, but I am going to give a present day example of this, an example of a listening session gone horribly wrong.

Right now, as we sit here today, there is a group over in Syria and Iraq who believe that God is telling them to terrorize, kill and even publicly behead others who believe differently than they do. God is calling them, they say, to create a new nation, a nation run by God, a nation that lives by fear and lives by the sword, a nation that has no respect for humanity, for human dignity, for life, and for brotherly love. Our military men and women right now are risking their personal safety to stop these alleged "God listeners" from advancing any further and causing any more damage in the name of God. This kind of behavior keeps me up at night as a clergy person because I align myself with God, as these others claim to do. They are surely not listening and are surely missing the mark.

How do we know that these actions are not of God? A really good litmus test to use is to ask whether the actions comport with the love of God as shown to us in Jesus Christ. If not, look the other way, because it is not God who is speaking.

In response to these alleged God listeners in Iraq, the Vatican released a strong statement saying, "All [people] must be unanimous in their unambiguous condemnation of these crimes and denounce the invoking of religion to justify them." In other words, God will never call anyone to harm: God always calls us to love. This is surely not God listening.

And this brings me to the last point about truly listening to God: we can't do this alone; we must listen in community with other believers in order to hear and to decipher what God is saying.

In our scripture, poor little Samuel just can't quite figure out what is going on. It takes the more mature priest Eli, who represents the community of faith, to fully comprehend what is happening to Samuel and to advise him on his next steps. In the PCUSA, we use this concept of community listening when we train and call our ministers. No one is ever allowed to simply walk in off the street and say, "God has called me to the ministry, give me a church!" All pastors, including Pastor Stu and myself, go through a long process that involves a lot of community listening and community agreement by a session, a committee and an entire presbytery before anyone is allowed to lead a church. This is one of the best examples of community listening I know.

Here at the Church of the Covenant, we also believe in community listening. And so, the worship and music committee of the Church is offering an opportunity to come together in community to hear God's voice in a new way. This coming week on Tuesday night, we will unveil a new prayer service in the chapel called "Connect." The "T" at the end of the word Connect is intentionally in the shape of a cross to show that "connect" means connecting with God. (We are not starting a dating service!)

This service will replace the previous healing service and will provide an opportunity to come together to pray and listen for God's voice. Sung prayer, group prayer and individual prayer will be offered in an atmosphere that is intimate and conducive to opening our ears and our hearts to the Lord. The music will be taken from the ecumenical Taize community in France, a group that began in 1940 at the beginning of World War II and pioneered the idea of hospitality and reconciliation as part of a meaningful prayer service. If you would like to hear God in this way, please give it a try!

This service is not a magic pill, but is part of a lifetime of listening for God's voice. We need to set aside the time to listen, to really listen for God's voice, to hear him when he calls. To hear Him when he instructs us, when he gives us the answers to the burning questions of our lives. My friends, God called to Samuel and is calling to you. The only question left to answer is "Are you listening?"