

## **Can You Hear Me Now?**

**1 Samuel 3:1-21**

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Noise. So much noise. It's everywhere. In 2015, a joint study of the National Parks Service and a number of other agencies collected private-sound collection data and their own studies from across the nation to create a map of noise. The quietest places in the nation, many of the remote parts of National Forests in the Rockies, showed average sound was at about 22 to 23 decibels. The loudest, the cities of course, like Chicago and Detroit, were close to the top of the noisiest list, where the average sound was at 63-65 decibels, almost three times the ambient sound of the forest. For comparison, human irritation and risk of damage from sound starts in the low 80s, though we can put up with a few hours of that before it becomes a problem.

And, of course, the noise isn't just the traffic and the airplanes and the mechanical noises that we've become immune to. It's also the chatter, the 24-hour news cycle that is always screaming "Here, look at us, over here," with pundits of every school of thought yammering on all day, every day, so much so that it's hard for the real news — the facts — to squeeze their way through. And don't get me started on the noise coming from Springfield and Washington. So much noise.

Of course, we can always purchase sound-cancelling headphones. The highest rated sets are available on Amazon starting at only \$349.99.

But of course some of us have become so used to noise that silence bothers us. There is an app on this iPad that will create sounds to lull me to sleep if I'm in unfamiliar surroundings. They include six different kinds — rainfall, box fan, Tibetan singing bowl, cat purring, grandfather clock ticking and, of all things, vacuum cleaner and hair dryer blowing.

It's almost comic. Sort of like today's story of Samuel and Eli. It's almost comic until it's deeply sad. But it didn't really sound all of that funny did it? When we don't understand the names of the two people, we miss a lot of the humor here. Who are these two men? Eli is the next-to-last Judge of the Hebrew people. And the verses just before today's passage point out that he's been struggling. His sons are the priests of the people and they make the Harvey Weinstein scandal — even the religious scandals of the last few years — all look tame. They have taken money from the people for themselves; they have stolen the sacrifices for their own food; they have sexually assaulted the women in the temple; they have desecrated the tabernacle. In short, they have been about as bad as bad could be. But Eli, the unhappy priest and father, has a name that means "My God."

And then there is Samuel, the late-in-life son of Hannah and Elkanah, the boy who was offered to God as a gift, as thanksgiving for the blessing he was to his family.

Samuel will be the last Judge of the people, and some will say, the first Prophet. He will be the one who responds to the demands of the people for a king. He will wrestle with God about who should be king and he will anoint the first two kings of Israel — the people's king, Saul, who will be a terrible disappointment, and God's king, David, who will bring about the greatest golden era of Israel and the Hebrew people, and then be a terrible disappointment. (But all of that is years away because in this passage, Samuel is still just a little boy. And his name? Samuel means "God has heard.")

So hear the story again: Then God called, "God has Heard! God has Heard!" and God has Heard said, "Here I am!" and ran to My God, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But My God said, "I did not call; lie down again." So God has Heard went and lay down. God called again, "God has Heard!" God has Heard got up and went to My God, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But My God said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." And so it goes. For two weeks in a row the lectionary gives us Abbott and Costello word games.

Still, with all that listening, all of that hearing, what might the call of Samuel be trying to say about God? Trying to say about this noble Prophet? Could it possibly be (I don't know, maybe) about Listening?

God has spoken to Eli a number of times leading up to now, has warned him that his sons' faithlessness is going to reap the whirlwind. And, as we see, with more than a little confusion and puzzlement, the first message that God will have the child Samuel deliver is a reiteration of God's decision: The line of Eli will no longer provide the priests in Shiloh. While God stays in relationship with Eli, the consequences of the terrible breaches of trust cannot be escaped. Eli's despicable sons will be the end of his line.

Throughout the period of the Judges, the people were stumbling along without strong leadership, seeking someone to tell them what to do, and God tried to use the Judges, mostly religious figures. Yet the people ultimately would not follow, for either those leaders would be corrupted by the power they had, or they would be perceived as weak and too soft or too religious to be true political leaders. The people looked around at the kingdoms around them — the strong nations around them — and they were all dynasties. They were led by kings who had palaces and armies and things you could SEE that said "here is power."

People didn't want to listen for a message from their God and they aren't even sure they want to hear the part of this story where God hears again and again. Instead, they wanted to SEE God's power. And so one of the first things they will ask the Kings to do for them is build God a temple. They don't want to be still and listen for God. They want to go visit God, to see God's power and let that power speak for God.

Just two days ago an anniversary passed virtually unnoticed. It was 225 years ago Friday that the nation dedicated the cornerstone of the White House, America's House — intentionally, not a palace but still large and white and isolated from the

government buildings around it. We like symbols of power and might in government and, for some, in the church. (Remember the Crystal Cathedral, the gorgeous glass monstrosity in California with upkeep expenses that bankrupted its church?)

Today's story is an invitation to let go of that desire to see signs and symbols of power, particularly divine power, and to consider what it means for us to listen for God, to create that quietness in our lives that is necessary for discernment to take place. How do we do that? How do we create a space as quiet as that little temple in Shiloh where Samuel slept? Maybe for you it's about finding actual quiet — less physical noise to relax and enter a time of prayer or meditation, and to seek in that quiet, to listen for ways you might discern where and who God might be calling you to be. For some it's not the physical noise at all. It's clearing away all of the expectations and busyness and "to do" lists that endlessly keep us moving forward, but never invite us to stop and consider where we are headed in such a hurry.

As Samuel demonstrates, listening for God has its pitfalls. Samuel is instructed to confirm Eli's prior divine experiences—experiences not of grace but of condemnation of the actions of his family. Listening and responding to the call of God is no picnic. It can turn your life upside down. Ask the hiring partner at the 1990s law firm of Clements, O'Neill, Pierce, Nickens and Wilson. Someday I'll tell you that story — of how it took illness and quarantine to create space for me to listen, and when I did, well, things changed.

But I can hear some of you and myself saying, but isn't this listening for God a bit dangerous? I mean some folks who say God told them to do something are just plain crazy, right?

Like Elwood P. Dowd. Sixty-seven years ago this weekend, Jimmy Stewart appeared on American movie screens as Elwood P. Dowd, the odd man who had conversations with an invisible rabbit — a friend who always had his best interests at heart and who advised him about choices he should make and helped him assess the actions of the people around him. Elwood listened to Harvey and then he had the nerve to act on Harvey's advice. He trusted Harvey and he told people he trusted Harvey. And everyone else said that he was crazy. They said, "We can't see any rabbit. We can't see any friend. This guy is drunk. He's nuts. Put him away."

Do we always think that people who listen are crazy? Maybe. I wonder why? Maybe it's because listening involves trusting. It involves taking words at face value. It involves being open and, in this modern age, we don't like to do that. We either don't communicate at all or do so from the safety of a text message, an email, not even a phone call, let alone a face to face meeting.

The reminder that God is listening, and is inviting us to listen, is actually a reminder that God is calling us into relationship. God listens to our prayers, our hopes, our terrors, our anger, our confusion, our songs of praise. But do we listen in

return? Do we make it a two-way relationship? For if we listen, we cannot help but be changed.

Friends, perhaps today the God who Heard calls out to us like the bickering children we are and says, "You never listen. Zip it for a moment. Stop trying to out talk one another. And listen. Listen to me. Listen for me. Listen for me in the peace of a battlefield where bombs are at last silent. Listen for me in the gentle quiet of a lover's embrace, in the breath of the one who sits behind you. Listen for me in the Word made flesh. Listen for me in the one who says, 'Follow Me.'"

It's not going to be easy. We want to worry, or we want to get busy, or we want to distract ourselves with the TV, with gossip, or the internet, or some other latest gadget.

In the silence, if we pause, if we rest in the silence of God's embrace, if we are willing to surrender what **we** want, what **we** think is best, if we can say, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening" and then come together and share what we have heard, share where we feel God calling us and then follow Christ into that new tomorrow — as Jesus once said, "we will see greater things than these...together we can see heaven opened and the angels ascending and descending." In other words, we can be a part of the coming commonwealth of God. So let us listen and be drawn deeper into relationship with the one who claims us and calls us, sure in the knowledge that that listening will lead to action but not just doing but following the one whose path leads to healing and new life, not just for us, but for the world.