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1 Samuel 3:1-21
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Hearing God through the Church

When I first came to Cascades in 2005, charter members Colin and Elizabeth Stout wanted to know emphatically when we would start construction on our new sanctuary and they were willing to provide some seed money to help make it happen. Now I had learned through the Pastoral Nominating Committee that this had always been one of the church's dreams as well. But being so green, I wasn't so sure that I wanted that as my first fish to fry.

So we waited. And we waited.

I spent those first few years listening to the congregation and hearing their hopes and dreams for the church. And the more I listened, the more it seemed that this was a common thread on everyone's heart.

Finally, in 2008, amidst a global recession, I sensed that the Lord was nudging us to begin the process. I first asked the wisdom of Larry and Beth Anderson. If there was anything I knew about the Andersons, they would shoot straight and tell me what they thought. Green light. Then I asked charter members Dorman and Sue Holcomb and Jim and Judy Scovil what they thought. They too seemed in favor of it, somewhat hesitantly, but agreed that we should take it one step at a time.

The seed money we had received was just enough to hire Soderstrom Architects in Portland. Because of the global recession, architects were needing work and were a dime a dozen. We read books, we studied Reformed Christian Worship, and as a church we decided that we longed for something more than a simple black box with a stage. We wanted natural light, the ability to look out at God's beautiful of creation, and a connection with our neighbors. Soderstrom captured all of our desires which is reflected in what we see today. A blending of the old with the new.

Momentum was building. Excitement was high. But we had no idea how to pay for it. Still, the congregation was fully behind it voting nearly 100% in favor.

We walked through two consecutive capital campaigns. The congregation gave generously so that we could take the next step. We secured loans through our Presbytery and our denomination. By 2013, we had just enough money to break ground and begin construction. In March of 2014, we opened this new space and dedicated it to God's glory.

God continued to provide generously for us through sharing worship space with The Love of God Church. And then by February 2020 just before the global

pandemic hit, two estate gifts enabled us to pay off all construction debts and be debt free once again.

Looking back, it is amazing to think about how God spoke to us through the voice and generous support of all of you. Thank you.

I tell this story because it is a very important one in the life of our church. A story of listening to God speak through the congregation and then taking steps of faith into something that was uncertain, and trusting God with the results. Now each week, we get to be inspired in this beautiful setting where we can hear from God. (This was the picture I spoke of last week that welcomed me into worship that day.) Is that a God wink or what?

Our scripture story this morning is one that might be familiar of someone hearing God's voice for the first time. Samuel was a young boy of about 12 or 13 years old. His mother Hannah had been unable to have children for many years. So she made a promise to God that if God had blessed her with a son that she would dedicate him to the Lord's service when he had come of age.

At the time this story unfolds, Samuel was serving in the temple as an assistant to Eli, the temple priest. They lived and slept in the temple, doing the work of the ministry when young Samuel had a surprise encounter with the Lord.

Join me as we read from 1 Samuel 3:1-21.

3 The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.

2 One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. **3** The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was.

4 Then the Lord called Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am." **5** And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

6 Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

7 Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

8 A third time the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. **9** So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!”

Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

11 And the Lord said to Samuel: “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. **12** At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. **13** For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. **14** Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, ‘The guilt of Eli’s house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.’”

15 Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the Lord. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, **16** but Eli called him and said, “Samuel, my son.”

Samuel answered, “Here I am.”

17 “What was it he said to you?” Eli asked. “Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you.” **18** So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, “He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes.”

19 The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground. **20** And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. **21** The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.

This morning I want to address how we can hear the voice of God through the church in the same way that Samuel did in his day. There are several things that I want to lift up from his story that I think will help us. First was Samuel’s intentionality and consistency about being in worship. Second was the mentoring relationships between Eli and Samuel that we often see in the church. Third is the importance of remaining open to hearing God’s voice in the church. Fourth is learning what God’s voice sounds like and how processing that with others in the church is crucial to our understanding. Fifth is that we need to share with others what we hear and how sometimes we need to discuss difficult things in the church. And sixth is the importance of continuing to listen and not disengaging from the church when our feathers get ruffled.

First let’s talk about Samuel’s intentionality and consistency about being in worship. Day by day, Samuel showed up in the temple, where he expected God to show up. And it was amidst that regular rhythm of worship, that God spoke to Samuel.

As I mentioned, Samuel was a young teen, 12 or 13, when he served as an apprentice to Eli, the temple priest. The lamp stand mentioned here was situated in

the Holy Place, or the room just outside the Holy of Holies, where the Arc of the Covenant containing the Ten Commandments was kept. This lamp was lit from sundown to sunup. It was most likely Samuel's responsibility to keep it going, which is why Samuel was laying down near by. Being that the lamp had nearly gone out tells us that it was close to dawn or the very early hours of the morning.

Some might say that Samuel was forced to be there since his mother dedicated him to the Lord's service before he was born. It was her faith and her intentionality that put Samuel in that position. Consider it like this, we believe that parents are called to present their children for baptism long before they are able to make that decision themselves. But that intentionality implies that parents will bring their children to church for worship and have them participate in the Christian Education programs of the church. This way our children can be around the Word of God, should God speak to them.

I distinctly remember one Sunday in our older sanctuary when I asked a rhetorical question during my sermon. And our youngest, Sofie, who was probably no more than four or five, was working through the children's notebook at Karen's feet. She stood up, turned around and directly answered my question. Folks, it may not seem like our kids are paying attention. But believe me, they are taking in more than we know.

The next thing that I want to address is the unique mentoring relationship between Elia and Samuel. Again Eli was the priest and Samuel was his young apprentice. Samuel was to learn everything about what it took to be a priest performing the Lord's ministry on behalf of the people. He assisted with the liturgy, the ritualistic sacrifices, and the prayers of the people. And the priest was also share a word from God, when God spoke. It was a very special relationship.

My friends, our young people crave relationships with adults that they can trust. Whether that is found through formal mentoring relationships or not, it doesn't matter. But know that our children are constantly watching and learning from us. How we worship. How we sing praise. How we give. How we pray. And how we learn. If we are engaged, our children will engage. If we are disengaged, our children will disengage. Lord knows the world is always trying to pull them away from the Church in its direction.

Jesus in speaking with his disciples said, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

The Apostle Paul sharing his last words of testament with young Timothy his mentee said, "You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Jesus Christ. And

the things that you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men and women who will also be qualified to teach others.”¹

My friends, I can’t tell you how important it is that we serve as nursery helpers, Sunday school teachers, Vacation Bible School leaders, youth leaders, and prayer partners. These are places where we can be in intentional mentoring relationships with the young people right here in our church. I also love how Nancy has welcomed the young people into the choir and Cordell has trained our youth to run our sound and video ministry. This is discipleship at its best. Because it is through these relationships that we pass on our faith, what Jesus has taught us, from one generation to the next.

If you have served in any capacity with children and youth this past year, would you please stand so we can acknowledge that. Thank you!

The truth is that church is always one generation away from extinction.

Next, this story implies the importance of remaining open to God to hearing God’s voice in the church. Notice Samuel’s persistence each time the Lord called. He thought it was Eli and so responded, “Here I am.” This happened not once, but three times. In Hebrew, “Here I am” is hineni. It means lo, behold, or yo what’s up? It implies a sense of surprise. I mentioned two weeks ago that we hear this often throughout scripture as someone’s response when they have a direct encounter with God.

I think this persistence gives a glimpse into Samuel’s heart and his desire to know God and to hear from God, himself though at this point he does not know the Lord.

Pete Greig writes, “In her beautiful memoir, *Even the Sparrow*, Jill Weber describes approaching God with a heart that says, “The answer is yes, but what’s the question?”²

Samuel’s heart said “Yes, Lord. Say whatever you want.” Remember not even Eli was in the custom of hearing God speak in that day. But he did instruct Samuel that maybe it was the Lord who was calling.

Notice that God spoke to Samuel, and not Eli the temple priest. I wonder if Eli, like Zechariah that we will hear about during Advent, was just too hard hearted and closed to God’s presence, because day after day, and year after year, God never spoke to him. The late theologian Dallas Willard said, “When God speaks in union with human beings, he often seems to purposely choose weaker vessels.”³

Like Samuel.

¹ 2 Timothy 2:1-2

² Pete Greig, *How to Hear God, A Simple Guide for Normal People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 227.

³ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God, Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 126.

Psalm 95 says, “Today, if you hear [God’s] voice do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did.”⁴

Let me give a little of the back story here. What this Psalm refers to was when the Israelites wandered the Sinai desert for forty years prior to entering the Promised Land. They were thirsty and complained to Moses that he had led them out there to die. Even though they had experienced God’s faithfulness in bringing them out of Egypt and through the Red Sea, they still allowed their hearts to harden toward God and no longer trusted God to take care of them.

My friends, how are we this morning?

How are our hearts? Have we been wandering in a spiritual desert for so long that we’ve forgotten the sound of God’s voice?

Do we need to be reminded of God’s faithfulness in the past?

Like Samuel, we need to remain open to God. To keep our hearts soft. So that we can be ready to listen when God speaks through the church.

The next thing we see is how important it is to actually know what God’s voice is like and then listen for it.

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, the person who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The person who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The watchman opens the gate for the shepherd, and the sheep listen to their voice. They call their own sheep by name and leads them out. When they have brought out all their own, they go on ahead of them and their sheep follow them because they know the shepherd’s voice. But they will never follow a strangers; in fact they will run away from them because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.”⁵

Jesus said, “I am the gate for the sheep.”⁶

“I am the good shepherd.”⁷

Then the Jews asked Jesus plainly whether or not he was the Christ. And Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me.”⁸

One of the most important things that we can do in the church is to help people hear Jesus’ voice themselves. Again the world is not afraid to share what it

⁴ Psalm 95:8-9

⁵ John 10:1-5

⁶ John 10:7

⁷ John 10:11

⁸ John 10:25-27

thinks. And so we need to make sure that we are tuning our hearts to Jesus' heart, so that we can discern his voice over that of the robber.

Ok, who's ready for a little pop quiz? Last week I shared a simple acronym that Pete Greig in his Book *How to Hear God, A Simple Guide for Normal People* in how to discern if a word we hear is actually from God. What was that?

ABC.

A is the word Affirming.

B is the word Biblical.

C is the word Christlike.

In other words, does what we hear sound like Jesus? If so, then we better pay attention.

One writer says, "We must tune our ears to hear God's voice. It's like the child who was told by his father during a symphony orchestra concert, "Listen for the flutes in this song. Don't they sound beautiful?" The child, unable to distinguish the flutes, looks up at his father with a puzzled look, "What flutes, father?"

The child first needs to learn what flutes sound like on their own, separate from the whole orchestra, before he is able to hear them in a symphony. So it is with us as children of God. Unless we take the time to hear Jesus' voice in the quiet moments of life, we will not be able to hear him in the symphony sounds of life."⁹

The next thing that we glean from Samuel's story is that once we've heard from God, we need to share with others what we hear and sometimes we even need to discuss difficult things with other people who can help us discern what it means.

Notice how Samuel's first words from God were not a comfort to Eli. It was a judgment against Eli's, two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who were wicked and had no regard for the Lord.¹⁰ They had treated the Lord's offering with contempt and slept with women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. God was furious.¹¹

Samuel faithfully told Eli everything the Lord had told him. Eli's response confirmed that what God had said was true and he accepted the outcome.

My friends, sometimes the Word of the Lord is hard to hear. Sometimes we aren't ready to accept it.

Hebrews 4 says, "The Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all of creation is

⁹ Stephen Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church* (Baker Books, 1999), p.63 as quoted on Preaching Today Website.

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 2:12

¹¹ 1 Samuel 4

hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."¹²

I want to take this moment to address something that many people believe is a taboo in the church. Politics. I will try never tell you which way you should vote on a particular topic or for or against a particular candidate. But if there is something that is a red flag in the way that our governmental leaders politick that is contrary to scripture, then it is the church's duty to expose it. I promise that I will try my best to approach political issues with grace and humility.

The last thing that I think this text challenges us on is the importance of continuing to listen for God's voice and not disengaging when our feathers get ruffled.

Sometimes we need to listen with the same grace and humility that we expect to hear from our preachers. Now I encourage us all that if we hear something that ruffles our feathers, ask about it. Pray about it. What was it that upset us? Did we hear it wrong? Do we need to ask for clarification? Is the Lord trying to get our attentions about something.

What if instead of walking away from the church, we engage the conversation in spirit of grace and humility. God might also want to use us to provide an alternative perspective, something that might not have been considered previously. Either way, we must resist the temptation to simply move on to another church who will tell just what we want to hear. I guarantee, at some point, even that church will eventually disappoint us as well.

So may we remain intentional about regularly attending church and bringing our children to church with us. May we engage in relationship with others in the church who will help us discern God's voice for ourselves. And may we stay with the conversation even when the road forward may be tough.

Amen!

¹² Hebrews 4:12-13