

Hearing God's Voice

1 Samuel 3:1-10

In the early 1900s, back when the telegraph was the fastest method of long-distance communication, a young man applied for a job as a Morse Code operator. Answering an advert in the newspaper, he went to the office address that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large, busy office filled with noise and clatter, including the sound of the telegraph in the background. A sign on the receptionist's counter instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were called into the inner office.

The young man filled out his form and sat down with the seven other applicants in the waiting area. After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of the inner office, and walked right in. Naturally the other applicants perked up, wondering what was going on. They muttered among themselves that they hadn't heard any summons yet. They assumed that the young man who went into the office had made a mistake.

Within a few minutes, however, the employer escorted the young man out of the office and said to the other applicants, "Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has just been filled."

The other applicants began grumbling to each other, and one spoke up saying, "Wait a minute, I don't understand. He was the last to come in, and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That's not fair!"

The employer said, "I'm sorry, but all the time you've been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse Code: 'If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours.' None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did. The job is his."

All of the applicants had heard the same message but only one of them had recognised it and understood it. Samuel was like that in 1 Samuel 3:1-10, he had heard God speaking to him but had not recognised it and thus did not understand it.

Now a spoiler alert for you! Apologies to anyone who doesn't want to know the ending, but the passage that we read from 1 Samuel shows us the beginnings of a man who would go on to become one of the greatest Prophets of the Old Testament, a man who would anoint the first kings of Israel, including King David, a man who would be compared to Moses in his righteousness. But here he is a young boy, who had been dedicated to God and left in the priest Eli's care by his mother in thanksgiving for God's answer to her prayer in granting her a child.

Samuel's job was to help Eli look after this place of worship; he helped open and close the doors, and tend the lamps, that kind of thing. He had been doing this for a while. One night as he was lying down to sleep, the Lord called Samuel by name. Samuel heard God calling him but didn't recognise that it was God and instead assumed that it was Eli who was calling him. When God speaks to us today we may hear his message to us but because we do not recognise that he is speaking to us we don't hear what he is saying and thus don't understand what he is telling us. Interestingly when Samuel goes to Eli and says to him "Here I am; you called me", the experienced priest also doesn't recognise what is happening and sends Samuel back to his bed. A second time God calls Samuel, again Samuel goes to Eli and again neither of them recognise whose voice it is that is speaking.

Eventually, after God has called Samuel for the third time and Samuel has again come to Eli, it is Eli that recognises that God is calling Samuel and helps Samuel to listen to what God wants to tell him.

In the world that we live in there can be so many things that stop us being able to listen to what God is trying to tell us. Busy lives mean that there are so many things trying to drown God out that when he speaks to us we don't hear him or if we do, like Samuel, we don't recognise that it is God speaking to us so we don't listen to what he has to tell us. Or in some cases we may actively chose to ignore what he tells us. We read at the start of the story of Samuel that Israel is going through a difficult time when "the word of the Lord was rare". The events described in 1 Samuel occur after those described in the book of Judges – the last verse of which reads "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." The people weren't listening to God and instead listening to their human natures and what they tell them to do. Indeed, 1 Samuel 2 speaks of how Eli's sons did what was right in their own eyes in their work as priests and abused the positions that they were in, and despite his many years of service as a priest Eli doesn't punish them for their behaviour. As priests they all knew how God had told them to act but chose to ignore it so that they could continue to live in a way that suited them. This maybe explains why, when Samuel comes to him, Eli also doesn't recognise that it is God that is speaking to him.

Some of you may be sitting there drawing parallels to the world that we live in today, where many people have had the opportunity to hear the amazing word of God in his Gospel message and the amazing gift that is available to us – forgiveness for all of sins, all of our transgressions and an eternal life with God – available for all who accept him into their life. This is an amazing blessing which God makes available to us all – but many chose to ignore because they recognise that following Christ's call to us to come and accept him into their lives will change their lives and they don't want to change and have to stop doing what they see is fit.

But if we choose to listen to what God calls us to do then we see in this story that God can call unexpected people to do unexpected things. Samuel was a young boy while Eli was a Priest, a powerful position to hold. You might have expected God to call Eli, but instead it is Samuel that he calls. Samuel wasn't expecting God to call him so when he did, he couldn't see what was happening. Could God be calling you to do something, but you don't recognise that is what it is because it isn't what YOU think God would call you to do. There have been countless examples through history of when God has called people to do things that weren't expected of them. If we think of the apostle Paul in the New Testament, he was an enemy of Christians who held the coats of those who stoned members of the early Christian church to death but was called by God to become one of the leaders of the early church – the last person anyone would have expected. Throughout history we see examples of people who God has used to do incredible things and we should be open to God calling us to do something that we don't expect.

Hearing what God wants to tell us is not always easy and can really challenge us. If you read on in chapter 3 of 1 Samuel we find out what God wanted to tell Samuel, and isn't easy listening for the young boy because God tells him that he is going to punish Eli's family for their sin in ignoring his commands and for abusing their positions as priest. For the young Samuel this must have been very difficult to hear – Eli had been a part of his life since he was very young - but he takes on board what God tells him and does not ignore it or try to change it. What God tells us may not be easy for us to hear, he might call us to do something that isn't what we want to do or which takes us outside what we are comfortable doing and we feel is too difficult for us. When this happens we may try to ignore what God has called us to do and try to go our own way, like Jonah did when God called him to go to Nineveh to warn them to repent of their sins or face God's wrath. Jonah tried to run away from what God had called him to do but ended up bringing God's message to Nineveh anyway, he just did it the hard way. When God calls us to do something, he is calling us because he knows that we will be able to do it. God knows us better than we know ourselves and will not call us to do something that we are incapable of doing – it may be something

that we cannot do in our own strength but we will be able to do it in God's strength. God knows what we are able to do – the Psalmist in Psalm 139 recognised this when he writes "you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely." Knowing that God sees us and knows us so intimately should influence us to act accordingly, not just in our outward actions, but in our inner thoughts, we should want to understand his plans for us, like the Psalmist when he writes "How precious to me are your thoughts, God!." So that we desire to hear what God wants to tell us and trust that whatever he calls us to do is possible when we do it in his strength.

This story of God's calling to Samuel is one that speaks to me personally in my current situation. I find myself in a place where I want to understand what God is calling me to do and thus I have a great desire to hear God's voice and to understand the plan that he has for my life but worry that like Samuel when he talks to me I won't recognise that he is speaking to me.

Because God is perfectly good and just and has continued to bless us and so we should desire to hear his will for our lives. In order to hear what God wants to tell us, we must (1) make ourselves available to God with the proper attitude, and (2) learn discernment; that is, the ability to tell whether we have really heard from God or not.

1. Availability and Attitude

There are many things that can distract us from spending time with God. Even at times when we try to make ourselves available for God, our minds may wander to other subjects. Making quiet time, free from as many distractions as possible, can be difficult in the business of modern life but it is important that we do so. The proper attitude is also important. Attitudes such as humility and courage are important. We have to humbly recognize that we don't have all the right answers. We also need to prepare our hearts so we have courage to do what is right, no matter how our fears or selfish ambitions may try to persuade us otherwise.

2. Discernment

Someone who knows what God is like knows His voice. Therefore, we must make time to improve our knowledge and relationship with God, through study of his word in the Bible, quiet prayer. Emotions are a part of discernment, but making a choice because you feel it is right is only one piece of the equation. We shouldn't entirely discount how we feel, but at the same time we must be careful to separate what is God's will for us and what are our own desires (which aren't necessarily His). The first test is that God's voice will never contradict His word, the Bible. That is one reason why study of scripture is so important. Quiet, dedicated prayer time is also important in order to try to block out the distractions of everyday life.

It is important to note in Samuel's story that God provided someone to help him to understand that God was calling him – whilst Eli had his faults he was still the one who helped Samuel to listen to what God had to tell him. In the Church of Scotland, when someone applies to the discernment process to identify God's calling in their life, they are assigned a mentor to work with them, because the Church recognises the benefit of having an experienced member of the Church to work with them to assist them in understanding what God is telling them. Like Samuel, on our own we

can struggle to identify what God is telling us, It often takes others in our lives to help us to understand the call God places before us.

Maybe you are sitting there and think I am not good enough for God to talk to me. Maybe, like I talked about earlier you know that you are ignoring a call that God is making to you,

perhaps to give your life to him and become a Christian or to take a leap into the unknown and do something that you don't think that you can do. In this case it is important to note that we aren't talking about a one way conversation here. We aren't just expected to listen to what God wants to tell us. He wants us to be able to bring all of ourselves before him in prayer, to share our struggles with us and to celebrate with us in our triumphs and he does listen – the fact that Samuel was in existence at all was proof of that as he was an answer to his mother's prayer asking God to bless her with a child. So if you have something that is stopping you listening to what God wants to tell you I would encourage you to bring it before him in prayer because he will hear you and respond. Also, as I said earlier it can often help to have someone, like Eli, to help us to discern God's calling in our lives so if you have something that you would like to talk about please do feel free to approach either Jim or myself and we will be happy to talk to you or our prayer team have a box in the vestibule where you can leave a prayer request, anonymously if you wish, that they will pray for.

God wants to talk to us, just like he spoke to Samuel – the way he talks to each of us may vary as each of us have our own personal relationship with him, but the challenge for us is will we hear him and listen to what he tells us? If there is something blocking you from answering yes then bring it before God and he will help you to overcome the challenges that you face. If your answer is yes, that you want to hear what God is telling you, then like when listening to your favourite radio station, you want to tune into God's voice and tune others out but to do that we need to

1. Be in range. You have to be in range - if you are too far away from the radio station's transmission or there are too many obstacles in the way you won't be able to hear it. We have to remove the things that put distance between us and God or which put up barriers and take quiet time with God alone to hear and listen to what he wants to tell us.

2. Be tuned to the right station. We need to be able to recognise when God is speaking to us so need to recognise his voice. God always speaks words that are consistent with Scripture—He will never contradict it. So we should always compare what we are hearing with His Word, and take time in prayer and reflection to be sure that we are listening to what God wants to tell us.

Listening to God won't always be easy, he might challenge us to do things that scare us or which mean that we will have to make a change in our life and give up something that our human nature desires, but we see in the life of Samuel that God called this young boy and because he listened to God and followed his will, he would go on to become one of God's most obedient servants and play a major role in leading God's people. God can do amazing things with us if we listen to his call the challenge for us all is whether when he calls us, we will recognise his voice and then like Samuel respond "Speak, for your servant is listening."