

Read lesson: I Samuel 3:1-10

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

There is nothing quite so compelling as a telephone ringing in the middle of the night, is there? Nothing wakes us up and commands our full attention, like the phone by our bed ringing at 3:00 a.m. For parents of teenagers, doctors on call, for pastors, the phone ringing in the middle of the night almost always means someone is in trouble. It's rarely good news at 3:00 a.m.

There is nothing so compelling as a telephone ringing, a voice in the night.

Professor Paul Keim, in a commentary on this story of Eli and Samuel, says we now live in a society that is "on call" twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The omnipresent cell phone has created a whole new reality.

Cell phones ring during meetings, concerts, movies, weddings and funerals, even church. It has happened to me and to others. Once, during a wedding rehearsal, the groom's phone rang as a friend was going through the vows. The groom dug the phone out of his pocket, said "hello," handed it to the bride—"Here. It's for you"—and she proceeded to have an extended conversation with a caterer.

The second incident was a clergy nightmare. A phone rang during rehearsal. Everyone reached for their phone, retrieved, looked, to no avail. The phone kept ringing. It was mine.

"In the midst of all this calling," Paul Keim asks, "how do we recognize God's voice calling us?" (*Christian Century*, 20 January 2003, pp. 22–23).

It is the subject of one of our oldest and best stories, perhaps 3,000 years old. I love this story. I love its nuances and ambiguity. I love the way God calls young Samuel one, two, three, four times in the middle of the night but Samuel doesn't know it's God calling. I love the wonderful exchange between old Eli and young Samuel.

If you have children or have been around children or ever kept a child overnight, you know that sooner or later you're lying there sleeping and all of a sudden you're aware that someone is standing by your bedside.

"I can't sleep," the child says. "I had a bad dream," or "I think there's a monster in the closet," or "I heard a voice." And you say pretty much what old Eli said: "There's no monster. It wasn't my voice you heard. Get a drink of water and try to go back to sleep." And if it happened three times, who wouldn't say what Eli said, perhaps in exasperation: "All right. Go, lie down, and if it happens again, listen; say 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening'?"

The story takes place back on the edge of history. Israel has barely evolved from a loose federation of tribes into a primitive nation. Eli is a priest who presides over a shrine, a sacred place where sacrifices are made, incense burned, and prayers said. Samuel's parents, Hannah and Elkanah, are old and have given up on the possibility of children. And then Hannah, as happens elsewhere in scripture, turns up pregnant. They name their son Samuel and, in gratitude, present him to God at Eli's shrine. Samuel becomes Eli's helper, apprentice. Eli is getting on in years, a little feeble, doesn't see very well, in fact.

There is a bigger story happening as well. Eli's sons, his priestly successors, are scoundrels, uninterested in continuing their father's work. And so part of what is going on in the old story is God choosing someone outside normal channels, an unexpected, unlikely one, a very young one, to do God's work.

Samuel will become Israel's first great prophet. Samuel will anoint Israel's first king, King Saul. It's an interesting and provocative and not always comfortable insight into the way God gets the work of the kingdom done.

God, this old story suggests, first tries the appropriate channels to get things done, and if it doesn't work, if people won't listen, God goes outside, and in this case chooses a young Samuel, to do the work God wants to be done.

"Listen," old Eli told Samuel. "Be quiet, stop fussing, stop talking so much, and listen."

Hugh T. Kerr, longtime editor of *Theology Today*, wrote an essay, “Whatever Happened to Dialogue,” in the midst of the noise and controversy and confrontation and conflict of the Vietnam War. Kerr observed that our problem is that so many of us don’t want to communicate in the first place. “Dialogue is difficult because opposing factions stop listening and tune each other out. . . . Conversation ends in a shouting match. . . . Fewer and fewer are in the mood for listening and hearing.” Dialogue is difficult because we are “radicalized, politicized, Balkanized, polarized” (*Our Life in God’s Light*, p. 137).

And that was thirty years ago, long before Hardball and Morning Joe and Bill O’Reilly and Rush Limbaugh hurling verbal hand grenades; red state, blue state; long before the take-no prisoners, no-compromise style of politics.

The greatest gift we can give to another person is to attend to her, attend to him, pay attention, listen. The greatest gift we can give to another is to listen—to really listen, listen with full attention—without interruption. It is a gift that holds within it the possibility of healing, redemption. And it operates between husbands and wives, partners and lovers and dear friends. Listen. It operates in the workplace, between colleagues, supervisors and supervisees, bosses and employees. It operates over coffee or shared meals. It is particularly important in meetings when the topic of discussion is controversial and people have different opinions and come to different conclusions.

Listen. It is important in the most intimate of relationships. Listen. Stop talking and listen. Stop, for a moment, and listen to the hopes, needs, hungers, dreams, grief, joys of the other, particularly the one you most passionately love. Set aside your self for a moment so another self has room and freedom to be.

Everybody needs someone who will listen, who will say you are important enough to me that I will set aside my agenda for a moment in order to attend to yours.

They used to require courses in seminary that were known affectionately as “Shut Up and Listen” courses.

Because, a minister's natural instinct is to talk and keep talking, to explain, argue, convince, dispense advice. Most of us need to learn that what people need from us is not more talk, not even advice, but an opportunity to be heard. Good physicians know that and spend important time asking and listening. Psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors know the therapeutic value of simply listening.

In the 1930s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German pastor, theologian, took his stand publicly in opposition to Hitler and the rise of the Nazis in Germany. He was, as you know, martyred at the end of the war for his part in the attempt to assassinate Hitler. In the '30s, Bonhoeffer organized an underground seminary at Finkenwald for theological students who shared his commitment to resist the Nazis. For obvious reasons the students lived in a close, tight-knit, almost secretive, community—not an easy situation in any circumstance. The health of the community was literally a matter of life and death. Out of the experience Bonhoeffer wrote a remarkable little book, *Life Together*. One of the sections is entitled “The Ministry of Listening.”

So listen to Bonhoeffer:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening. Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren [they were all men in the seminary] is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that he not only gives us his Word but also lends us his ear.

Bonhoeffer notes that “Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others—they forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking” (p. 98).

It was maybe the smartest thing the old priest Eli ever said, the best priestly advice he ever gave: Listen. I love this story because I believe God does call you and me. I believe the voice of God comes to us—in the world, for instance, in the beauty of a sunset, the power of a storm, a newborn's cry, telling us that creation is good and holy and a gift given to us new every morning, calling us to gratitude and praise.

And I believe God calls us in the voice of others, in the cries of the people of Haiti, the poor, the vulnerable and marginalized, the children—the voice of God summoning us to be faithful and obedient, kind and just, compassionate and generous.

And I believe God speaks to us in great art and beautiful music and noble causes like caring for those in need, like peace, like an end to hunger, like education and opportunity for all the children—causes that tug at our hearts and consciences and love and summon us to get up and do something, that summon us to participate and sacrifice.

And as a Christian, I believe that God spoke and continues to speak to us through Jesus Christ. Jesus was God's Word made flesh, God's word to us, spoken clearly, eloquently, and powerfully. In Jesus, in his birth and life and teaching, his kindness and compassion, his inclusive, unconditional love for all humankind, God speaks to you and me and calls us to be his faithful disciples.

I love the story of Samuel and Eli because the voice is not immediately recognizable as God. I love the story because it takes God four times to get through to Samuel. It's true for most of us, I think. We envy those who have heard God speak in such a clear, clarion voice that they know exactly what's on God's mind, what God thinks about this or that, what God wants them to do with their life. But it's not the way it is for most of us.

When you decide you want to be a Presbyterian minister, you have to go to your Presbytery, an assembly of ministers and elders representing all the Presbyterian churches in the area, for an examination—several in fact. At the first one, the Presbytery wants you to explain your sense of call: "Tell us how it is that you know yourself called to ministry." I dreaded the moment. I wasn't sure how to answer.

"What about you, Bill; how do you know yourself called?" Well, I fumbled and bumbled and hemmed and hawed and mumbled something about liking people and wanting to be helpful and being interested in Jesus and having a lot of questions about God. I'm not sure why, but they voted me in. I've thought a lot about that and have concluded that maybe that's how God calls us—through other people, through our sense that we are here not for our own amusement but to do God's work, to make the place a little better, a little easier for the challenged, a little more gentle and kind and hospitable.

I've concluded that maybe it's God calling when we can't sleep at night because our conscience is bothering us or we find ourselves worrying about earthquakes or war or orphaned children.

And I've concluded that maybe God calls us through the questions we ask and struggle over, that maybe God wants us to be open to new thoughts and to be brave enough to be in a lifelong search for truth and beauty. And I've concluded that God does speak to us deeply through that man we can't seem to forget or ignore, that compelling man Jesus, who was, in fact, the Word made flesh.

God's word to us.

In George Bernard Shaw's play on the life of Joan of Arc, there is a scene in which the archbishop and King Charles are interrogating Joan of Arc.

The archbishop asks, "How do you know you are right?"

Joan answers, "My voices."

The king interrupts: "Oh your voices, your voices. Why don't the voices come to me, I'm the king, not you."

Joan responds: "They do come but you do not hear them."

It's an important word that Eli says to Samuel: Listen.

Amen