

“Are You There, God? It’s Me, Samuel.”
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Lent Sermon Series, Spiritual Practices: Discernment

I have heard it said that the sound of our own name is one of the sweetest sounds we will ever hear. In fact, our brains activate in a particular way when we hear our names rather than the names of other people. From an early age, we are predisposed to hear our names as a form of our significance and recognition of our personhood. The science behind this isn’t broken down for us in the narratives of the biblical text that use various naming techniques, but we do know one thing at least. God has a tendency to call out people’s names in times of change. Moses, Paul, and Zaccheus are a few examples of this. God calls out Samuel’s name in our text this morning, and his life is never quite the same.

Samuel was the oldest child of Hannah, one of the wives of a man named Elkanah. She was the favored of Elkanah’s two wives, and 1 Samuel tells us that her womb had closed. This trope echoes the experiences of Sarah and Rebekah in Genesis, both of whom were also favored wives, matriarchs in the family of Israel, and went to great lengths to conceive. Hannah, in deep lament, came to the temple to pray. Eli, her priest, thought she was drunk because of her weeping. That day she promises that her son would serve God with his life if God relieves her infertility and give her a child. God grants her this request, and she becomes pregnant with Samuel. And as she promised, she gives her son to God’s service. Eli becomes the guardian of her son and begins his training as a servant of God. This background about Samuel matters for us this morning because his calling started the moment his mother promised him for a life of service in the temple. She is a prophet, like Mary, singing with joy about what is to come through the ministry of her son. Samuel’s moment did not occur out of the blue; his mother, his mentor, his God were preparing him for the encounter in the temple that night.

Samuel’s birth narrative is unusual. So is the historical moment in which he ends up hearing God’s voice. Israel is a grouping of nation-states at this point in their history. Based on the twelve tribes of Israel, the descendants of Jacob have spread throughout the region. They are consistently fending off other nation-states from attacking or attempting to enslave them. To create a semblance of order, judges or chieftains took care of social and political matters. They were warriors, advisors, and guardians of the people. They would

come together in times of war, but kept to themselves unless the situation called for them to band together.

1 Samuel 3 describes this as a time when “visions” and “the word of the Lord” were both “rare.” The hallmarks of this period of their history include disorder, priestly anemia, and splintered power. The Book of Judges tells us that “everyone does what is right in their own eyes” during this time of clan-based leadership (Judges 21:25). Judges also goes on to tell us that this happens because “there is no king in Israel.” The priests keep up their rituals, their sacrifices, and their prayers, but visions are unusual, and so is the word of the Lord.

Does this sound familiar to any of you? Lack of unity, rallying only in times of crisis, forgetting to train their ears and lives to hear God’s call? I know I hear this in the rhetoric that comes after horrific incidents: in the endless “thoughts and prayers” on social media platforms; in the shaking of heads; wringing of hands; all of it a cycle of flooded emotions, compassion fatigue, and an uncertainty about what to do that would actually make the situation better.

Samuel is growing and learning in a similarly chaotic, where-is-God landscape. But he serves and lives with Eli in the temple. He falls asleep near the ark of the covenant, near where the lamp burns all night. It is during one of these nights, seemingly like most of the others, that Samuel hears a voice calling to him. Now remember, the word of the Lord was rare in those days, and visions were unusual. So Samuel, dutiful Samuel, goes to his elder, Eli, and says, “You called to me?”

Now, Eli is getting up in years and cannot see as well as he once could. Eli, unfamiliar with how God’s voice might sound to Samuel’s ears, tells him to go back to bed. God calls out to Samuel again: “Samuel!” He comes again to Eli, and Eli sends him back to bed. Finally, at the third round, Eli realizes who is calling to Samuel as he sleeps in the temple where the ark of the covenant, one of the holiest symbols in the Jewish faith, resides. [The Hebrew tradition tells us that it held the 10 commandments, a golden jar of manna, and Aaron’s budded rod. Samuel sleeps next to this holy place containing the symbols of the symbols of the life he will lead - the symbols of the Law, God’s covenant, and the priesthood.] It is no surprise to me that is in this holy place, alone, where a small child most certainly should not be sleeping, that Samuel finds himself that night. Sometimes that is how it works, doesn’t it? The places that some of us were told we should not tread, or should tread with caution, we end up encountering the Holy. And that is what happens to Samuel.

Hebrew scholar Valerie Bridgeman says that “Eli mentors Samuel into hearing God’s voice.”¹ Although Eli’s ear had grown unaccustomed to God calling out, he finally recognized what was going on. He encourages Samuel to head back, and he does. This time, Samuel’s response to God’s voice is different. He says, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” He says exactly what Samuel told him to say the next time the voice came to him. And this time, God is standing in front of Samuel. The presence of God is not only a voice in this third encounter. God comes to Samuel with a physical presence, one that gives a word that Samuel must deliver.

The word God has for Samuel to hear isn’t a pleasant one. It is a word that comes not for him, but for Eli. An anonymous prophet told Eli earlier that God would judge him and his sons because Eli did not stop his sons, both of whom are priests, from stealing the best parts of the animals meant as sacrifices in the temple. They were stealing them for their own meals at home. Eli could or would not stop them from doing this, and God is displeased about the selfishness and greed of the priests. God appears to Samuel, not to Eli, to deliver this message. Eli, nearly blind and nearly missing God’s voice, does not receive this word directly. God instead gives this word to Samuel to deliver as his first prophecy.

Really? God wants to send Samuel in there to speak truth to his mentor? To speak this judgment upon an elderly man, nearly blind, someone who has cared for him and mentored him? The answer is yes. Yes, Samuel must go in there and speak truth to his elder. He must go in and share these consequences with this man and his family. Yes, he must go in there and tell this hard word to his mentor and guardian.

Samuel does not rush over there in the middle of the night again. You might have noticed that his eagerness seems to stop for a minute. Previously, when he heard someone calling his name, he came running. He hurried into Eli’s room the times he thought Eli needed him. And now, when God appears and tells him what to do, he sleeps on it. Imagine Samuel--afraid, confused, emboldened, resolute, loyal--he does not act initially, but remains in the temple all night. Yet he does it. He pauses for a moment, but he comes into Eli’s room and he tells him exactly what God said to him that night. And Eli accepts this word with humility and obedience. He does not argue with it; Eli receives what God has for him.

Spiritual discernment requires us to act at some point. Yes, it takes attentive listening, and a commitment to listening for a voice that is not our

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3556

own. Yes, it takes the humility of an open mind and heart. And, sometimes discernment happens individually, in community, or in the presence of a wise spiritual director. All throughout the story of Samuel's early life, people are listening with care to the tug of God's Spirit. Hannah, his mother, knows her son does not belong to her, but to God and God's service. Eli knows that God is calling out to Samuel, and tells him the words that he needs to say in God's presence. Samuel listens to God's words to him, recounting them to his mentor, sharing the first hard truth of his ministry.

God give us all words to share. Whether it is a message that comes in times of lament like Hannah, a message that we do not understand the first few times like Eli, or a message that requires us to speak truth to power like Samuel. Discernment works in our lives and in our hearts differently. None of us are exactly the same, so why would God give us formulas for how God will interact with us? Do not be surprised if your experience of God is different from the person sitting next to you, the person walking down Park Avenue, or the person you encounter on the train. God comes to us in a myriad of ways in the moment we find ourselves. This opens us up to experience God's presence in a multitude of ways. Discernment requires a change in behavior. Discernment reveals the tugging of God's Spirit within and around us.

This week, our headlines make me think of Samuel's time and place. The description of the time of Judges seems to fit too closely with our own - leaders in our city and in our country do what is right in their own eyes, lacking a clear moral compass or sense of accountability. God's voice can seem distant and easy to confuse with other people's voices. Violence between groups of people does not seem to be subsiding. The shooting at the mosque in Christchurch, an explicitly white supremacist terrorist attack, is one more in a hateful string of violence against our Muslim siblings. We are meant to mourn with them and the communities around us feeling the impacts of violence, whether near or far.

A few months ago, the confirmation class visited the Islamic Society of Baltimore on a Friday night for dinner and prayer. They happened to be having their winter festival that night. The mosque was full of families from a variety of Muslim backgrounds. It is one of the largest mosques in the Baltimore area, and the diversity of the festival reflected that. We received hospitality and friendship from our hosts, and they taught us about the similarities between Christianity and Islam. They showed us the face of God that night, and there is hope in united across our differences. We might discover we have more in common than we originally thought, and find solidarity to move forward together against the hatred and violence around us.

We live in a time when we must speak up like Samuel, even if we are unprepared or afraid of the consequences. Our headlines this week do not leave us any space for turning away from the current moment. The realities that we are facing as we look at the world around us call us into action, rather than away from action. We cannot and must not forget that discernment leads to action. The core wonderings of discernment guide us deeper into the question, “What would you have us do, God?” As Mary Oliver says, “what will you do with your one wild and precious life?”