

# Developing an Ear for the Word of God

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**1 Samuel 3:1-18; Mark 1:14-20**

Master preacher and author, Barbara Brown Taylor, tells about a poetry reading at Princeton featuring the poet, W. H. Auden. The auditorium was packed with students eager to hear his every word.

But at the time, Auden was already advanced in years. When he began to read, his voice was so faint and feeble--and the microphone so inadequate--it was nearly impossible to hear him.

People began whispering, "What did he say?" Those down front began relaying what they thought they heard. Still others filled in the blanks with what they could remember of Auden's poems. Pretty soon, the hall was filled with more distortions of Auden's words, more than anything he actually said.

A similar state of affairs prevails when it comes to hearing the word of God. There is no lack of noise from those who purport to speak for God. But one suspects that the buzz about what God is purported to have said is a far cry from any actual, authentic, electrifying word from God.

The Bible says of the time when the boy, Samuel, labored in the old shrine at Shiloh, "The word of God was rare in those days." But as the story unfolds, we learn that the problem was not that the word of God was rare; the problem was that no one was listening, at least not with the eager, attentive, obedient ear hearing the word of God requires.

Maybe that's the problem in our time too: Not that God has ceased to speak, but that stuck in the amber of our own pride and privilege, we have lost our capacity to hear.

Thankfully, Samuel's story has much to teach us about how to develop an ear for the word of God.

The story begins as Samuel is working as a boy priest under the supervision of the decrepit old holy man, Eli. Ironically enough, the name Eli means, "My God." It's the same expression Jesus uses in his anguished cry from the cross, "Eli, Eli--my God, my God--why have you forsaken me?"

But sadly, Eli has forgotten he belongs to God. He is so immersed in the busyness of everyday life and the bureaucratic demands of running a religious institution, he has lost his heart and his hearing for God. Further, as we learn in 1 Samuel Chapter 2, Eli turned a blind eye to the reckless misconduct of his sons, pilfering temple offerings and taking sexual liberties with women worshipers. Sadly, sexual abuse of women by men in power is nothing new.

But a new power, a new promise, is afoot in the shrine at Shiloh. For though Eli's physical and spiritual powers are waning, his young protégée, Samuel, is eager for a word from God. So much so that Samuel sleeps in a strategic, hopeful place: in the sanctuary's innermost chamber by the sacred ark containing the Ten Commandments. There, as an oil lamp flickers into the wee hours of the morning, Samuel falls into a fitful sleep, longing for a word from God.

Suddenly, Samuel is awakened by a voice so real he thinks Eli is calling him: "Samuel! Samuel!"

"I'm here," Samuel cries in the night before running to see what it is this time. What does the old man need now?! A sip of wine, perhaps, or someone to empty the chamber pot?

But Eli is not calling. It is just a dream. So Samuel is sent back to bed.

Then the Lord calls a second time, "Samuel! Samuel!" Once more, Samuel's answer sounds in the night: "Here I am!", but once more, it is a false alarm.

At this point, the Bible gives Samuel a pass: “Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.” It’s the old priest Eli who ought to know better. And to his credit, the third time the voice sounds and Samuel comes running, it dawns on Eli what is happening. “Go lie down,” he coaches the boy. “And if the voice sounds again, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

Samuel does as instructed. And the fourth time the voice sounds, Samuel answers, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

And this time when God speaks, Samuel listens, even though the word from God turns out to be a painful truth neither Samuel nor Eli want to hear.

No, the problem was not, is not, that the word of God is *rare*. The problem was and is that hearing the word of God requires the capacity and courage to listen.

Consider the skill set listening for God’s word requires. One has to be eager to listen, present to listen, and ready to listen. This is not the sort of self-preoccupied, half-listening we usually offer one another. This is an energized, focused listening the marriage enrichment folk call *Active Listening*.

In active listening, you don’t spend the time while your partner is speaking, to compose your rebuttal. Instead, you suspend your own agenda and grievances long enough to try to really hear what his or her hurt or need is.

Before Samuel can make sense of that voice in the night, he has to be schooled in active listening for the word of God. Samuel doesn’t just wake up one night as a spiritual prodigy! No, first he was first steeped in the stories of God’s people by his mother, Hannah, who dedicated him to the Lord as a toddler.

And while attending to his duties at the shrine at Shiloh, he absorbed and learned the Hebrew faith, long before he was able to claim that faith for himself.

And while Eli had his faults, he did prove a competent guide when Samuel needed one most, coaching him on what to say and do when the Lord called to him in the night.

Samuel Coleridge, the English poet, chatted with a visitor about the spiritual nurture of children. The opinionated visitor weighed in on the subject. "I don't think children should have religious training forced upon them," he declared. "It will only prejudice the child. Instead, the child should freely choose his religious preferences in adulthood."

Coleridge listened politely and then invited the guest to see his garden. Apparently, it was a neglected, overgrown plot of ground.

Surprised, the visitor sputtered, "Coleridge, this isn't a garden; it's nothing but weeds!"

"Well, you see", the poet said coyly, "I didn't want to impose my will on the garden. So I gave it the freedom to grow as it wanted, expressing itself any way it wanted!"

I'm grateful for the many parents, grandparents, and God-parents at Knollwood who are their child's Hannah or Eli: those who make the spiritual formation of their children a priority.

They bring their children to Sunday School so they can learn the stories of the Bible and the story of Jesus. They bring them to children's choir so they can learn "Hymns for a Lifetime." And they make time for church-based social and service opportunities that knit these children into this community of faith.

Thank God, these children have a fighting chance--even in a world that thinks everything else is more important--to develop an ear and a heart for God. Until we can say of them, what the Bible says of both Samuel and Jesus, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him, upon her."

Beyond learning the skill of active listening for God's word, there is another revealing touch in Samuel's story. And that's the way the word of God sneaks up on him--and sneaks up on us--in times of vulnerability and need.

It is no accident that God comes calling on Samuel in his sleep, or that dreams are a primary mode of revelation in the Bible. When we sleep, our ego slips off center stage and our defenses come down. That gives the subconscious, so often in hiding, a chance to slip out and speak up. Some of our deepest wisdom comes from this Spirit-breathed part of ourselves. As the 19th century Scottish divine, George MacDonald, observed, "Sleep is God's contrivance for giving us the help he cannot get into us when we are awake."

And even when we are awake, it is often at the moments of our greatest fear or need that the word of God sounds. When the apostle Paul wonders why God will not remove his thorn in the flesh, the crucified and risen One answers, "My grace is sufficient for you. For (my) power is made perfect in (your) weakness."

Sometimes, when our resources are exhausted and our energy spent, it creates an opening for God to speak a word our usual frantic, competent, in-charge selves, would never hear.

Recently, a dear member of this fellowship said goodbye to her husband of over sixty years. The last few years were tough on him and even tougher on her as Alzheimer's slowly stole the love of her life.

And yet, amid the bewilderment and the pain, she learned the truth of the promise, "My grace is sufficient." She also learned some valuable lessons, one of which was, "You don't have to remember everything to enjoy or value it."

This truth was driven home within months of her husband's death when, despite the ravages of Alzheimer's, he exuberantly danced a jig of joy at his 90th birthday party.

No, "You don't have to remember everything to enjoy or value it."

Frankly, I didn't know that until she told me. And that's when God's word to her became God's word to me.

And finally, a third vital truth gleaned from Samuel's story: It is that God's word is usually surprising and often sounds a hard, difficult word. When Samuel, the budding prophet finally hears

the divine summons, it is an unsettling word: "I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle," says the Lord. Thus, Samuel is commissioned to proclaim the collapse of Eli's rotting, priestly house and the start of a new chapter in the life of God's people.

The next morning, Samuel busies himself with sweeping the floor, taking out the trash, and other mundane duties. The last thing he wants to do is to face Eli and tell him what God has said.

But finally, the old priest pries it out of him. Samuel, with the hint of tears in his eyes, shares the painful oracle of Eli's doom. The old priest nods solemnly and confesses, "It is the Lord. Let him do what seems good to him."

And how does Eli know this is a word from the Lord? Because this word confronts rather than countenances his worst excesses. This is a hard, shocking word that decrees the collapse of the status quo.

This weekend marks the one-year anniversary of Mr. Trump's presidency. Unlike many, I don't find myself particularly disillusioned with him. Disillusionment usually arises when we expect one thing and get another. But during the campaign, Mr. Trump made it perfectly clear the kind of person and president he would be, and for the most part, he has lived up to that billing.

No, my disillusionment--and here, it runs deep--is with those in the Religious Right who have provided theological justification for everything from nuking North Korea to minimizing racial slurs and sexual harassment. Whenever a supposed word from God dovetails perfectly with our personal or political preferences, you can be sure that is not a word from God.

The Bible has a term of derision for those, ever ready to provide an oracle pleasing to the king. They are called "court prophets."

Well, Samuel is no court prophet. He is a prophet of character and courage, ready to hear and speak God's often difficult, challenging word: a word like that of Jesus, telling his first hearers,

“Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. You can’t stay the same; you have to change!” Or as he later tells a gaggle of fisherman, “Drop everything and follow me.”

Or as Paul counsels the Corinthians, “Quit acting like you have forever. The time is short. The world as you know it is passing away.”

Yes, God’s word is often difficult and challenging. Because whenever God speaks and people listen, new worlds are called into being. And when that happens, business-as-usual is not an option.

No, when God’s word is spoken and heard, hallowed and obeyed, nothing short of God’s reign of love and justice, breaking forth in Jesus Christ, will do.

Will Willimon tells of a woman who adopted nine foster children. When a dumbstruck reporter asked why anyone would do such a thing, she answered, “Because I saw a new world coming, and I wanted to be part of it!”

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Those are powerful, even revolutionary words. Just be careful what you pray for.

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*Eternal Word of God, even Jesus Christ our Lord give us hearts and ears eager to hear your word. Give us the courage to live and do your word, because neither we, nor your world, can become what you intend, until we do. In your empowering, emboldening name we pray. Amen.*

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