“”

Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church

1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6,13-18

January 7, 2024

***1 Samuel 3:1-20***

***3 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.***

***2At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 3the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. 4Then the Lord called, “Samuel! Samuel!”[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Samuel+3&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-7281a)***] and he said, “Here I am!” 5and ran to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down. 6The Lord called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” 7Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 8The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. 9Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’ ” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.***

***10Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” 11Then the Lord said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. 12On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 13For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God,[***[***b***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Samuel+3&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-7290b)***] and he did not restrain them. 14Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.”***

***15Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. 16But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” He said, “Here I am.” 17Eli said, “What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.” 18So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.”***

***19As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. 20And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.***

***Psalm 139:1-6,13-18 (p.577)***

***O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
2You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.
3You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.
4Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.
5You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
6Such knowledge is too wonderful for me***

***For it was you who formed my inward parts;  you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
14I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
    Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
16Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+139%3A1-6%2C+13-18&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-16256a)***]
17How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
18I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end[***[***b***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+139%3A1-6%2C+13-18&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-16258b)***]—I am still with you.***

Last week, we were able to see ourselves as connected through time to our predecessors in faith who responded to God’s actions just as we are called to. We discussed Psalm 72 which was probably written about 950 years before the baby Jesus was ever seen by those three travelers who followed a star and came from so far away. Add to that, the 2024 years since Jesus was born, and we covered a lot of years last week. Almost 3,000 years from then until now. Today’s text from the first book of Samuel comes from even further back than the psalm of King David that we read last week.

Before there were kings in ancient Israel, there were judges. Eli was the second to last judge, before kings. Samuel succeeded Eli as a judge, and later Samuel anointed Saul, Israel’s first King. King David was king after Saul. All this means that we added 1,000 more years to last weeks’ time span. The span of time from today’s old testament reading until today is now about 4,000 years.

Today’s reading is from the first book of Samuel, chapter 3. In chapters 1 and 2 we hear about Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Hannah, distraught by not being able to have children, went to the temple to offer herself to God. Eli, high priest at the time, saw Hannah praying silently with her lips moving and wondered if she were perhaps intoxicated. When Eli heard *why* Hannah was in such distress he said to her, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have requested." Hannah subsequently became pregnant and gave birth to Samuel. As promised, Hannah went to the temple after Samuel was weaned, at about age 3, and gave Samuel to God. He would now live with Eli and serve in the temple under the direction of Eli.

Today’s text then begins one night when Samuel, around 12 years old (Jesus was also 12 years old when he was in the temple), is woken from his sleep next to the ark of God, by a voice calling his name. “Samuel, Samuel!” “Here I am” said Samuel, assuming naturally that it was Eli calling for him, and went to Eli.

We’re given a little more context about Eli, and the shape of society at the time, in the introduction to the text. “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” Eli’s eyesight was not well, and the lamp of God was flickering, perhaps to go out soon. Neither Eli or Samuel would be expecting something from God. *Of course* Samuel would think the voice was Eli. *Of course* Eli would tell Samuel to go back to bed.

The third time Samuel came to Eli, Eli realized what was really happening. Imagine how Eli might have felt. The word of the Lord was rare in those days. Visions were not widespread. Eli might have been excited to think that the word of the Lord was coming again. Maybe he could feel the import of the moment on Samuel’s behalf, knowing that something important, maybe even sacred was going to begin. Go back to bed Samuel. If you hear the voice again, say this. Say, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” Maybe Eli thought, “It’s happening!”

For Samuel, this was all new. Although he had been learning from Eli for nine years, he did not yet know the Lord. The word of the lord had not yet been revealed to him. Samuel had not had that epiphany. He knew *about* the Lord, about the temple, about the rituals and rules and workings of everything about the temple – he even had access to the ark of God. But Samuel does not yet know God. Samuel does as he is told, and sure enough the Lord calls his name a fourth time, and Samuel says, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” Thus begins Samuel’s relationship with God.

I would like to say that each of us has a relationship with God that started in earnest when we finally gave God a chance to speak. We finally said “Speak, for your servant is listening,” or some such more modern turn of phrase.

I would *like* to say that. But as I gave thought to when I thought my relationship with God began, I’d have to say it probably began with me saying something like, “Wait, what did you say?” I think that sometimes for some people, God doesn’t often use words, rather, God shows us something. Or maybe we’re unsure of God’s presence in our lives, so God takes us on a kind of retrospective of our own lives and reminds us where God has been there in the past, in order to give us confidence that God will be there in the future. Sometimes we see something special – a rainbow, the sky breaking through storm clouds, the evening fog creeping over the coastal hills, a couple in love, two toddlers sharing a giggle. How does God speak to you? Does God speak only when answering a prayer? Or is God *that* friend, who always offers words of advice or their opinion, even when we didn’t ask?

When we think about listening to God, we think of prayer. I have a question for God, and I ask. What I find though is that I end up doing all the talking, saying “amen” and then I feel done. What’s missing there? Yep, the listening. I’m sure we all have some idea about the difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is a passive, physical act. It’s involuntary. If your ears are in working order then you hear things. Listening though is a voluntary act. We choose to listen so we engage with what we are hearing. We are intentional and focused, we try to make meaning of what we are hearing.

How is listening to God different than other listening? Well, for one, we often make meaning of what we are hearing by using visual and auditory clues. We listen for a tone of voice, the choice of words, the speed of the one speaking, what is the look on their face and their body language? We decide whether we can trust what they are saying. Without the visual and auditory cues that humans display, how do we know how to listen to God? Can we trust the message?

Each of us needs to figure that out for ourselves, by praying, speaking to trusted friends, reflecting on our own experiences. One person was asked how they discerned God’s voice from their own wishful thinking. The person said that often the message was something that came to them so quickly, that they wouldn’t have had time to make it up themselves.

There’s this trend in some churches, on the first Sunday of Epiphany, to give everyone in the congregation Star Words. A Star, with a word on it, for reflection, usually about God’s glory, or light. Not wanting to be trendy, yet happy to adapt a trend, I’ve created Listening Words for all of us. (Take one) The message of today’s text isn’t just that the word of God continues to come to us even when we’re not seeking it (it does), not just that we are all called by God (we are), but that when God’s word comes, we can’t just hear it. We need to listen to it.

God’s word to us is going to be *the* answer that is *the* Word we need to hear. We can trust that because of our second scripture text for today. God is trustworthy and can speak to each of us individually because of what Psalm 139 tells us. If you could open your pew bibles to p.577, let’s read together, Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18.

People who know me best, are the people I trust to give me feedback that meets my needs, knows my biases, knows when to push, when to back off, when to be direct, always are honest. God knows us *better* than any friend we can imagine, *deeper* than any parent, friend, professional; and *longer* than anyone else.

When we say “Here I am” when God calls, we know that what comes next will be worth listening to.

Amen.