

Title: "Hearing Voices"
Text: I Samuel 3:1-10
Date: January 07, 2018

Inspired by the ordination of elders and deacons today I am opting to take a break from the lectionary this Sunday. On the surface we have one of several passages I could have chosen illustrating a sense of call, but there are some intriguing aspects to this story that attracted me.

Before even getting into "the call" part of the story, we really can't gloss over the context. It almost seems to have a contemporary ring to it when we read: "**The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.**" (v. 1) As if to reinforce that point, it is highlighted that Eli, the priest, is nearly blind. Though not in our passage this morning, if you read the preceding chapter we would have learned that Eli's own two sons were using their priestly positions of privilege to enrich and fatten themselves. Later on his family falls apart. His sons die in battle, he falls over and breaks his neck, his daughter-in-law dies in childbirth and gives birth to Ichabod, which means, "*Where'd the glory go?*"

Historically Protestants have sometimes used stories like this to show how corrupt our Jewish or Catholic forebearers had become. These days evangelical churches use stories like this as they look down on mainline denominations. Notice how the enemy is always someone outside one's own group.

So we look to Samuel with high hopes for a new beginning. We also look with excitement to our new elders and deacons considering the possible infusion of new life and energy that they bring. Yet to keep these expectations in check, verse 7 reminds us: "**Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.**"

God was calling Samuel, but that wasn't readily apparent to him. Likewise I truly believe that God has called those beginning an intentional level of service with us today. Some might have a sense of that, while others might just feel they are the by-product of efficient committee work. Like Samuel, when we hear voices it may take some experience to distinguish between the voice of God from those other voices in our head.

Evelyn Underhill has written: "**Many people feel unaware of any guidance, unable to discern or understand the signals of God; not because the signals are not given, but because the mind is too troubled, clouded, and hurried to receive them.**" As Samuel's story illustrates, it is often times in the dark, in the silence, that we hear God's voice. Jungian analyst James Hollis writes: "**We have all forgotten what our presumptive saints, mystics, and prophetic voices earnestly proclaimed: that if we wait upon the dark, it grows luminous; if we abide the silence, it speaks.**"

We need church leaders who are conversant in this language of spiritual discernment. For Shepherdstown Presbyterian to be the best version of itself we need more than best-practices from the corporate world. While we can benefit greatly by these skill-sets, we need the movement of the spirit to enable our unique self to blossom forth.

- How are we called to be different from other churches?
- How can we be a source of healing for those injured on their spiritual journey?

- On what social issues are we called to be change-agents in today's society?
- In what areas are we called to be an equipping center to help people be faithful in resisting empire?
- In what areas are we called to repent?
- In what areas are we called to be warm and humble incubators for a new way of being in the world?
- And finally, when we consider our youth, how can we meaningfully coach them, like Samuel, to be conscious of God speaking to them?

Answering these questions is the work of spiritual leadership.

Now just when you think I am about to send our elders off into the wilderness on individual vision quests, I am reminded of the insight of Stephen Chapman, an Old Testament professor at Duke Divinity School. Perhaps we need to consider how Samuel and Eli *together* offer two visions for ministry, both incomplete without the other. Chapman once told a crowd, "**Keep before you Samuel and Eli as twin emblems for your developing sense of [spiritual leadership] identity: spirituality and professionalism, receptivity and expertise, religious authenticity and the tradition. And then in your congregations the word of God will be heard often. And as for visions, well . . . there will be visions galore.**"

Samuel was having a most restless night as God was trying to break through to him. Eventually it was Eli who "**perceived that the LORD was calling the boy.**" Perhaps he recalled something from his own youth. So then Eli said to Samuel, "**Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'**"

Samuel went back to his bed, and once again the calling came as before, "**Samuel! Samuel!**" This time, however, Samuel said, "**Speak, for your servant is listening.**"

No pressure, but my prayer is that we may all learn to say, "**Speak, for your servant is listening**" and mean it.

The implications of this are more than just a personal piety. I am going to conclude with a verse we did not read, except that I will be replacing the word "Israel" with "Shepherdstown." **Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in [Shepherdstown] that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle."** (v. 11)

Oooh. I like the sound of that.

Amen.

I Samuel 3:1-10 (NRSV)

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.

² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³ the 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. ⁴ Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!"^[a] and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵ and 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. ⁶ The 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." ⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸ The 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. ⁹ Therefore 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.

¹⁰ Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."