

Epiphany 2

January 17, 2021

Hearing God's Voice

1 Samuel 3: 1-10

Did you ever wonder how our hearing works? Since there are so many different parts, and so much that could go wrong in the process, it is no wonder that many of us have a hard time hearing, and even more remarkable that not more of us do! It's possible, though, that even if we don't have trouble hearing, we could very well have a problem listening. Often, when we ask someone, "Did you hear what I said?" we are not asking if the eardrum vibrated so that the little bones whacked the cochlea. We are asking if the words were processed and understood in the way we meant. A failure to communicate is often cited as a major problem in relationships. Frustrated partners will cry to one another, "You never listen to me!"

In our reading from 1 Samuel, it's clear that Samuel had no trouble hearing the voice of God calling him; he just had a problem understanding what was going on! We can't blame him, though. Young Samuel did not have the kind of experience of the Lord that the old priest Eli did. Also, the opening verse of the chapter says that the word of the Lord was rare in those days.

Eli knew what was happening, however. He instructed Samuel to respond with the words "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening." Now, it was not "your servant hears you," but "your servant is listening."

The use of the word “servant,” combined with the assurance that the servant is “listening,” implies a kind of readiness for action, indicating that Samuel is prepared to do what he is told. What Samuel is told to do is to give Eli some very bad news. Eli is a tragic figure in the Bible. He was a priest in Shiloh, where God’s tent was set up at the time and where the Ark of the Covenant was housed. He had two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, and the Bible says that they were scoundrels. They took meat intended for sacrifice to God and ate it themselves, and did other things that also angered God. God promised to punish Eli’s family and that both of Eli’s sons would die on the same day.

When Samuel followed Eli’s advice and told God, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening,” God proclaimed the fulfillment of that promise. He said that Samuel was to tell Eli that the time had come for the judgment to fall on Eli’s house. This is a terrible message for Samuel to have to deliver after his very first time hearing directly from the Lord!

God’s judgment on the people of Israel was harsh as well — the Philistines attacked and captured the Ark of the Covenant, and both of Eli’s sons were indeed killed. Eli did not respond to the news about his sons in a particularly sorrowful way; perhaps he knew they were scoundrels.

When he heard that the Ark of the Covenant had fallen into the hands of the Philistines, however, he fell over in shock and died from a broken neck.

Samuel soon rose to prominence in Eli’s place, and it was he who led the

people of Israel as a judge and priest, up until the time that Saul was made king, and then David after him. Samuel's life proved that he had learned the lesson well — that we must not simply hear God's voice and then do what we want; we have to actually listen to what God is telling us and take it to heart. Hearing without listening leads to destruction, as the family of Eli discovered, while truly listening to God's voice with the heart leads to blessing, as the life of Samuel bears witness.

How do we develop our listening skills? Cultivating a life of prayer is critical to being a listener rather than a simple hearer in the life of faith. Of course, one of the dangers in prayer, too, is that we would be a talker and not a listener. One-sided conversations in prayer do not contribute greatly to our spiritual growth.

There are ways to truly listen in prayer. If you use scripture as a means of listening for God's voice, make sure you take time to digest one passage before going on to the next. Ask yourself questions like: "What did this passage mean to the ones who first heard it? What does it mean for me now?" and "How does God want me to respond to this passage?" Reading a passage slowly, and multiple times, can contribute to this type of prayerful reading.

Imagination can play a part in our understanding of a scripture passage. Picturing the scene in our minds — the smells, the sounds — and thinking about how we might have felt had we been there can enhance our perception.

The Christian tradition also includes a type of meditative prayer, commonly called “contemplative” prayer. Lamentations, which instructs the reader to “wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD,” and Psalm 62, which proclaims, “For God alone my soul waits in silence,” are just two of the passages that provide the biblical underpinnings of contemplative prayer. This method of prayer involves sitting quietly, clearing the mind and listening for the Lord to speak — internally, of course. Some traditions incorporate a phrase, such as “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” that is repeated over and over in the mind as a way to clear it of all thoughts that might distract. By opening ourselves to hearing God’s voice, not only do we create a space for silence in our lives, which is so important, but we also disrupt the one-way conversation patterns we might have fallen into with the Lord.

Perhaps we have truly listened and now we believe that we understand what God wants us to do. Maybe it’s something that seems risky, like what Samuel was called to do. How do we make sure that we have heard from God and are not just following our own impulses?

The first step is to be sure that what we think we hear God saying is consistent with scripture. God will not tell us to do something that is contrary to the Word.

If the impulse passes that first test, then it is always good to consult some

wise Christian friends. Those who know you well should be able to help discern if you are hearing God's voice or your own. Ultimately, it will be up to you to determine the truth, but it is always advisable to consult others before taking on something new. In the Quaker tradition, they sometimes form "Clearness Committees." These are groups of experienced Christians who will listen and pray about a call from God to assist the one who feels called in determining if it was truly God speaking.

The truest test for a prophet in the Bible, however, was whether what the prophet said was going to happen actually did occur. Samuel declared God's message to Eli, and it came to pass. When God told Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, the most important sign God gave to prove that it really was God speaking was that the Israelites would worship God on the very mountain where God had appeared. In other words, Moses would know it was God who sent him because the mission would be successful.

This may not sound very helpful at the outset. Knowing that it will be clear that God told us to do something only when it is successful does not seem very encouraging if you are not sure you should even begin an endeavor. But if we have carefully listened, searched the scriptures and consulted wise friends, then the promise that God will use success as a measure of God's involvement should be liberating. We can follow the advice of the angels to "not be afraid," and move confidently in the direction of the Holy Spirit's

leading.

We should, therefore, not just listen for God's voice, but listen boldly. Above all, we should never again return to the bad habit of simply hearing God's voice with our ears and not with our hearts. With ears and heart both wide open, let us hear God speaking and respond readily with the words "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."