



**“More than a Call Story”**  
**Scripture – 1 Samuel 3:1-10**  
**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**  
**Sunday, June 3, 2018**

The word of the Lord was rare in those days ... Drowned out by reports of school shooting after school shooting and conflict raging in the Middle East.

The word of the Lord was rare ... Indiscernible when the ring of the phone shattered the calm of your world: the doctor calling, a tell-tale timbre to her voice; the police officer, with the news you always envisioned *other* people receiving.

The word of the Lord was rare ... Lost in the oppressive quiet of voices missing from the family table, and amidst sirens that signal the unimaginable happened again.

Whether we are reeling from communal crisis or personal pain, it's easy to assume God has fallen silent. Our ears strain to hear the voice of the Lord; our eyes search for glimpses of grace. Yet, sometimes, it seems that the word of the Lord has become rare in *our* day.

This was true in Samuel's time, as we learn from the story before us. It must be important, for the narrator opens with this observation: The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

If we retrace the story line, we understand why. In Jewish scripture the story of Samuel follows on the heels of Israel's most shameful hour.<sup>1</sup> A crime more befitting a horror film than sacred text thrusts the nation into civil war. Brother turns against brother, and one of the twelve tribes is all but wiped out. The book of Judges ends with the sobering reminder: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

We turn the page and meet Hannah — the mother of Samuel — as she prays desperately for a son. This barren wife vows that she will dedicate her child to the Lord, if only the Almighty will grant this, her deepest desire. So, after Samuel is born, Hannah returns to the temple and leaves her beloved boy in the service of the Lord.

So here we find ourselves at the temple in Shiloh, where a young Samuel is serving the Lord under Eli's direction. The nation is in shambles; the sons of the priest do what is right in their own eyes. And in the midst of this, the faithful anxiously watch and wait.

---

<sup>1</sup>In the Tanakh, or Hebrew Bible, 1 Samuel follows the book of Judges. The Christian canon follows the Septuagint—the Greek Old Testament—in placing the book of Ruth between 1 Samuel and Judges.

Yet, when God speaks into the stillness of night, the servant of the Lord does not recognize the voice as divine. Samuel assumes the call comes from his mentor; so he runs to Eli and declares, “Here I am.”

“I did not call,” says the befuddled priest.

So Samuel returns to his mat on the temple floor. But he does not soon find rest.

Twice more, God’s voice disrupts the silence. “Samuel, Samuel!” And twice more, the novice runs to Eli: “Here I am, for you called me.”

As the narrator notes: At this point in his ministry, Samuel does not know the Lord. Despite many nights of sleeping before the ark — in the very presence of God — this young servant pledged to the Lord has not received a direct revelation. He’s spent his days listening to the words of his mentor, but has not yet heard the Word of the Lord.

But tonight this changes. As the boy presents himself to Eli a third time, the priest discerns that the voice calling to Samuel is none other than the voice of God. So he counsels the boy, giving him words to say should the Lord speak a fourth time. And when the Holy One calls out again, Samuel is ready to hear and to respond: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

I imagine many of you can relate to this story ... Maybe not to hearing a voice so clearly that it prompts you to reply: “Here I am,” but to the experience of having a person in your life who helps you discern the call of God. Perhaps it was the teacher who said, “You really have a knack for this stuff.” Or the counselor who helped you claim the passion tugging at your heart. Or the friend from church who encouraged you to become a mentor, and watched you light up as you worked with students from Urban Promise.

For me, it was a chorus of voices: my youth pastor, who — early on — perceived the Spirit’s pull on my life and affirmed my gifts for ministry; my volunteer site coordinator, who opened the Scriptures so that I could encounter Christ anew; my mom, whose wisdom and insight helped me discern the still-small-voice of God.

So often we need someone else to help us hear the Word of the Lord. This is one reason I gravitate to this story. Because it’s not *Samuel* — it’s not the boy set apart from birth to be a prophet of the Lord, but *Eli* — the flawed priest, who discerns the voice of God speaking to the young man.

But that’s only *one* reason I gravitate to this narrative. Here’s the other:

The account of Samuel’s call is so much more than a “Call Story.” It’s a story of God’s persistent voice shattering the silence, offering hope to a people in desperate need of a Word from the Lord.

It’s not so different from the Creator speaking into a formless void to call forth light that could pierce darkness and to command swirling seas to give way to land.

... Or from the Divine Parent sending the Word-Made-Flesh to inhabit a nation breaking under the yoke of occupation and to reveal the abiding truth of God’s love to a doubt-filled world.

... Or from Christ calling out to a storm to demand that the wind and waves cease their raging.

Time and again God’s persistent voice breaks into the chaos of our lives, offering good news to a world consumed by despair, and hope to communities craving a life-giving Word. Because the Holy One is never absent, even in

an age when the Word of the Lord seems rare and visions are not widespread. Our God draws near to us, if only through hushed whispers or subtle gestures of grace.

In the story before us, it is *Eli* who perceives the call of the Lord — The priest who mistook Hannah's devotion as drunkenness; the father whose sons defy God and corrupt the priesthood; the leader whose dim eyesight reflects the blindness of the nation. *This* is the one who discerns the in-breaking of God, and offers Samuel words to greet the Holy One: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Eli is far from perfect; but — in this moment — he has perfect perception. And we all benefit from his insight. For Eli points Samuel — and us — to the Lord's presence in our midst.

So, this is the question for us today: Will *we* be like Eli? Will we discern God's voice shattering the silence, and help others hear the Word of the Lord?

We, too, are imperfect servants of the Holy One — each and every one of us. But with the eyes and ears of faith, we can glimpse the Spirit at work and perceive the call of the Lord. Friends — this is our role as disciples: to point to the in-breaking of God in a world devoid of visions, to recognize the voice of God in a world desperate for good news ... so that others may come to know the Lord, just as Samuel did.

Will we glimpse God at work when servants of the Lord envision a just society? When people of faith say, "Let's talk about it," and begin the hard but holy work of racial reconciliation? And wherever this work opens us to new insight and the promise of healing, we trust that the Holy One is in our midst. Will we glimpse the Lord at work, and — like Eli — help others come to know the grace of God?

Will we hear the voice of God, echoing in conversations between Christians and Muslims, as strangers become friends, and two communities become one? In table fellowship where people of different creeds break bread together, and diversity is celebrated? At such occasions, like last month's Iftar dinner with the local Islamic community, ears begin to discern the Word of God in stories of unlikely kinship. Will we hear the voice of the Lord, and help others come to know the love of God?

Will we discern God's presence as disciples take seriously Christ's call to service, and prepare meals for neighbors in need? As members of this community share meals with the residents of Epiphany house, or guests from Family Promise, or friends at Saturday Morning Breakfast? In these moments — when generosity abounds and lives are transformed — the face of God suddenly becomes visible. Will we discern the Lord's presence, and help others come to know the welcome of God?

Friends, will we point to the in-breaking of God in a world that is divided and weary with suffering ... a world devoid of visions and desperate for good news? For, even now, God is active — and calling out with a persistent, grace-filled voice, inviting us to join in redemptive work, and beckoning us to respond: Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.