

¹ 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!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵ and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But Eli 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 again 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." ¹¹ Then 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. ¹² On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³ For 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, and he did not restrain them. ¹⁴ Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." ¹⁵ Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶ But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." ¹⁷ Eli 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." ¹⁸ So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him." ¹⁹ As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

I Samuel 3:1-20

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"Words That Don't Fall"

Rev. Amy Terhune

I very distinctly recall a scene from a sitcom in the 90s called "Mad About You" starring Paul Reiser and Helen Hunt, who play a married couple. It's evening and they're sitting in the living room watching TV and Paul Reiser's character is relaxing, but Helen Hunt's character has papers and books and work spread out before her. He says something to her, she nods, still very engaged in the work in front of her, and as the scene progresses, it becomes clear that she isn't listening. He tries a few more times, before he finally says something like, "I quit my job today. I'm thinking we should get a boat and live our lives sailing the Caribbean as pirates." She says "uh-huh. I can't do anymore, I'm going to bed." She puts away her work, kisses him, and heads back to the bedroom. Paul Reiser sits there – dumbfounded – until about 20 seconds later, when she comes storming back into the living room, and says, "WHAT!!!" Most of us, if we're honest, will admit that there are times when we just tune out what others are saying, particularly those closest to us, those we live with, our spouses and children and parents.

I was at a workshop back in October, and one of the presenters noted that part of the reason dialogue has gotten so difficult is that most of us listen to respond rather than to learn and understand. We start formulating in our own heads what we want to say, and we miss things. So the facilitator instituted a policy for dialogue where we had to wait 30 seconds between comments. The purpose was to listen, and then have silence to reflect on how we'd respond. I was surprised by how hard it was. And while it was

slow, it was also quite meaningful. I found myself more engaged and better equipped to respond thoughtfully when we slowed it down and allowed time to digest what others were saying.

Listening is a major component of faith. But in a world of overstimulation – bright light, constant noise, and lots of fluff – it can be difficult to take the time to slow down and attend to our relationship with God. The good news is that God listens to us even if we don't listen as well to God. Our lesson today is from the 1st book of Samuel, who became one of Israel's great prophets. Samuel, whose name in Hebrew is Shem-el which means "God Hears", is an answer to prayer for Hannah, who was barren. She pledges to God that she will devote her son to God's service if God will heal her barrenness. God hears that prayer and responds, and Hannah is faithful. After Samuel is weaned and able to function well enough on his own, she takes him to the temple and gives him to God.

With an aching heart, I can imagine well enough the mixture of pain and pride that Hannah might have experienced when she gave Samuel up to the Lord and left for home again without her little boy. But for the life of me, I can't imagine what life was like for little Samuel. Did he understand what was happening and why his parents left him behind? And what would a bunch of priests do with a kindergartner? Was he the only kid there, or was this a fairly standard practice—like part of a group or boarding school or something? I don't really know. According to diagrams of the ancient temple, there were rooms located around the edges of the men's court of the temple where the priests lived, and the text seems to suggest that this is where Eli was sleeping, but I have no idea why the child was sleeping in the temple where the Ark of the Covenant was located. I mean the temple was full of smoke and incense and gold and treasures and artifacts and offerings. What did they do—roll out sleeping bags and put the kids in there? There is no other part of scripture anywhere that describes anyone, let alone kids, sleeping in the temple where the ark is located, but that's what it says here, so...okay. We do know from hearing about Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, that God tends to call to people who enter into that space, so that makes sense, I guess, but it's an odd story.

Most of us don't have a background like Samuel's. And most of us don't have a call story like his either. But make no mistake: God calls us. There is a calling on each and every one of our lives. It may be our profession, or it may be what we do with our spare time, or both. It may encompass the entirety of our lives, or it may change every season, but all of us are called. "Every worthwhile endeavor in life is potentially a vocational calling from God. 500 years ago, Martin Luther helped us see that. Until Luther's time, work was viewed by the Church as punishment for sin. When Adam sinned, part of the penalty was that he should work. "Not so," said Luther. Luther saw a person's work as his calling from God. Before Luther, the word 'vocation' referred only to life in a monastery where monks spent their lives worshipping God. [from "*Speak, Your Servant Hears*" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] Since, then 'vocation' has been something every single one of us has a chance to find. And it's not necessarily our employment—it's whatever brings inner fulfillment and advances God's plans for our world.

Sometimes we have difficulty seeing the value we add to the world. Most of us need help to figure out what we're called to do. I want to try something. Close your eyes and just listen for a few moments.

How many of you remember who won the world series in 1980?

How many remember who took home the Oscar for best actor in 1990?

Can anyone remember the name of the Nobel prize-winner for science in 2000?

A few of you may know one of those answers. I doubt any of us knows all of them. You can google it later if you really want to know. But now answer these questions:

How many of you remember at least one person you could talk to in high school if you were having a rough time?

How many remember at least one meal around the table with someone you love?

How many remember who gave you your first bible?

Who prayed for you in years gone by?

Who do you pray for?

Can you call to mind the face of at least one person who would smile when they hear your name?

You can all answer those last questions. You know their names. They're not famous. They're not prize winners. But they're the people through whom God touches you. The difference we make in life is in the lives of those around us.

All of us need others to grown in faith. Samuel certainly did. Clearly, Samuel is no longer a little boy by the time this story takes place. He's got some responsibilities, it seems. But he doesn't yet know the Lord. You may think that's strange, given that he's grown up surrounded by priests. But I've known plenty of dedicated church people who know about the Lord, but don't know the Lord personally. It happens, more regularly than we might wish. But at least it doesn't seem to be a new problem. Samuel doesn't yet know God. He's not yet aware of how God works, moves, calls. He's still young. But Eli knows. And Eli had enough sense to know that while he couldn't, in one night, pass on the sum of his knowledge, he could start the ball rolling, plant the seed, seize the teachable moment. In order for Samuel to become aware of what God might be doing, he had to be exposed to the idea that God might be doing something. Go and listen, says Eli. And Samuel does.

"I'm reminded of a story about an old veteran alley cat. One day a mouse escaped his claws and hid in a storm drain just under the curb of the sidewalk. The mouse was trembling but remained quiet, knowing the cat was probably waiting for him to exit. Suddenly the mouse heard a horrendous meow followed by an equally dreadful bark. Then there was silence. "Ha, ha," thought the mouse, "that old cat has finally had his comeuppance." After a few minutes, as the mouse cautiously inched forward out of the storm drain, a mean-looking paw suddenly grabbed him. As the cat held him and looked him in the eye, the mouse said, "I thought I heard a dog bark." "You did," said the cat, "but in order to survive on the street, you've got to be bilingual!"

"Friends, the cat has the right of it. We've got to be bilingual to survive in the fullest and truest sense. God places a unique call on our lives, but it must be lived out in this world we share. So we need an ear to the street; we need the vocabulary of this world. But we also need an ear tuned to the call in the night—the words of the Spirit that warm the heart, inform the conscience, and enlighten the mind. We need the teaching that makes us smart. We need the Word from beyond that makes us wise. We need the skills that help us set up ledgers and accounts. We also need our faith tradition that calls us to be accountable. We need to be familiar with technology and social media, but we also need to connect to an eternal family network that spans time and space and is held together by the overarching web of God's love for us all. [2 ¶s adapted significantly from "*Here Is Where It Happens*" by Arthur H. Kolsti, www.Sermons.com.] To listen to God is to learn how to be bilingual.

One final thought today. Samuel was called, he got some help, he learned to listen. But the word he received was not an easy one. It was a prophetic word—one that called wrong-doers to justice, one that heralded change, one that could be perceived as threatening, frightening, intimidating. In order for Samuel to ultimately discern God's particular call on his life, he had to find his courage. All of us are called. All of us need each other to help us understand, and all of need to listen more attentively. But each of us is given our own unique call—some are easier than others, but my experience has been that sooner or later, that call presents its own unique challenges to each one. And so, regardless of what the call is—ordination, teaching, volunteering, writing, studying, befriending, cleaning, driving, healing, picking up trash—whatever that call is, sooner or later, we're going to need courage to see it through.

Recently, I read an interesting post about Nazi Germany back in the 1940s. It pointed out that the total population in Nazi-occupied Europe at that time was around 280 million people. Of those, approximately 12-15 million were Jewish; at least, we think so – record-keeping wasn't quite so diligently pursued in those days. About 6 million Jews died in the holocaust. Another 6 million or so non-jews also died. The state of Israel recognizes approximately 28,000 people around the world as the *Righteous Among the Nations* – these are non-Jewish people that helped hide the Jews or smuggle them to safety, such as Corrie Ten Boom, Oskar Schindler, and Chiune Sugihara. Now, Israel fully acknowledges that there were many who helped that have not been awarded the honor of being named in the *Righteous Among the Nations*, either because stories can't be verified or names are unknown, or beneficiaries were captured and gassed and could never report the help given. So let's say that the 28,000 named in the *Righteous Among the Nations* represents 1% of the helpers – that the real number of helpers is closer to 2.8 million people who helped save Jewish neighbors and friends. That's better, right? But remember that the total population is 280 million, which means, statistically, if we're generous, that 1% of the total population helped. Those are the numbers. So statistically, in this sanctuary this morning, one or maybe two of us would have helped. Not taking into account character or moral fiber, just going on the statistics; the numbers – the reality is that most would have turned a blind eye, either because we didn't have neighbors and friends that were Jewish and so we weren't personally affected, or because the risk was so great – life and death – that we could justify the decision not to get involved. Many of us like to say, "I would have helped". Statistically, no we wouldn't have.

Now, you may well be wondering where I'm going with this. It's pretty bleak, all things considered. My point is this: the ones that did help, almost without exception, listened to something inside them that was louder than the fear. They all knew fear. But they saw past it. They were prepared to suffer for what was right. They were prepared to give up tomorrow for the sake of the tomorrow they could see in their hearts – a tomorrow that was better for all people. What I want to do, as your pastor, is to see beyond fear, and empower you to do the same. I don't know if I'd have the strength. I pray that none of us faces a choice like those in the 1940s. But I also know that I won't have the reserve of strength I'll need when challenges come if I don't learn now to be bilingual and listen to God's voice.

The scripture tells us that as Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. His words had staying power. They had wings to carry them. They led people to God. They led people to faith. Because his words didn't come from him. His words came from God. He listened. He got help. He accepted God's call. And he had the courage to trust God's leading in troubled times, through the rise and fall of King Saul, through the rise of King David and all his flaws. Samuel served as the spiritual leader of a nation in turmoil. He spoke truth when it hurt. He spoke truth when it was unpopular. He spoke truth when it threatened his life. He spoke truth, and the Spirit carried his words like banners overhead.

We'll honor Martin Luther King Jr. tomorrow because he had the courage to live his calling and to forge a road ahead where there wasn't one. He had the courage to face fire-hoses and jail cells and beatings and burning crosses, and ultimately, bullets. Like Samuel, he received a prophetic word, and like Samuel and countless others, he had the courage to speak truth. He had fear, but he saw past it. On the night before he died, he offered prophetic words that still fly:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." [from Martin Luther King Jr. "*I've Been to the Mountaintop*", delivered at Mason Temple in Memphis, TN, April 3, 1968.]. Amen.