

**+ 1 Samuel 3:1-10 + Speak, Lord, for Your Servant Is Listening +**  
**+ Eighth Sunday after Pentecost + 18 July 2010 +**

When God speaks, are you listening?

Little Samuel was growing up. His mother had dedicated him to the Lord's service out of thanksgiving for God's grace in giving her a son. So at age three or four, she brought him to the tabernacle complex in Shiloh, where he was placed under the care of the high priest of all Israel—Eli.

Now Eli had been serving Israel for a long time. His sons worked as priests there assisting with sacrifices and the worship life of the people, but they were wicked. They **"had no regard for the LORD"** (1 Samuel 2:12). They stole from the Lord parts of the sacrifices, sometimes by force. They were immoral and led female servants in the tabernacle into sin. They brought scandal and contempt to the house of the Lord. Rather than remove them from office, however, Eli only mildly rebuked them. So God issued a prophecy of judgment on Eli's house. **"You will see distress in my dwelling...in your family line there will never be an old man"** (1 Samuel 2:32). Eli and his family had issues.

So did the nation of Israel. This was a gloomy time of spiritual poverty in Israel. Time and time again since the Israelites had settled in the Promised Land, the people had willingly chased after other gods, lustfully engaging in disgusting acts of fertility worship. Time and time again the Lord had sent a conqueror to wake up his people from their spiritual slumber. They would repent and God would send a deliverer, but finally their wickedness and unbelief reached a point where they didn't care about the true God anymore. They no longer listened to the Word of God through his prophets or received it with willing, joyful hearts. The wickedness and apathy of the priests in the tabernacle only added to the confusion in that depraved age. No one was listening, so God stopped talking. **"In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions."** Israel deserved to be cut off from their gracious God and his Word forever. It was a dark time.

Amazingly amidst all this, young Samuel remained virtually untouched by the wickedness going on around him. He knew the Lord by faith and served his Lord faithfully. As he grew older, his responsibilities increased. Perhaps Eli even thought that Samuel would make a fine priest someday. Samuel was now old enough to be the guardian of the doors to the house of the LORD. He opened them every morning at dawn and closed them at night. That meant each night he slept within the tabernacle, which also housed the ark of God—the enduring symbol of God's presence among his people.

Samuel also served as Eli's personal attendant. Eli was very old with bad eyesight. He was heavy-set and it was difficult for him to do everything he used to do. He needed Samuel's help at any and every time of day or night, so Samuel was a busy young man serving the Lord and the high priest.

After one busy day, Samuel was resting peacefully in the tabernacle. Thick darkness still covered the land, when out of the darkness, a voice called, "Samuel!" It was the Lord, but Samuel didn't know it. The young man was used to Eli's summons during the night, so he called out, **"Here I am."** Samuel threw off his blanket and ran to Eli. Again he said, **"Here I am; you called me."** Samuel's sudden entrance into Eli's room shook the old priest awake. **"I didn't call; go back and lie down."** Eli wondered if the young man was dreaming or hearing things in the night as he drifted off to sleep.

Samuel dutifully went back to his post, crawled into bed, and pulled the blanket over him, when he heard the voice again. **"Samuel!"** Again Samuel tossed off the blanket and ran to Eli. **"Here, I am; you called me."** Again the old priest was startled awake. "What is going on?", Eli wondered as he told Samuel, **"My son...I did not call; go back and lie down."**

Everyone was confused. Eli didn't know why Samuel kept rushing to his room to help. Samuel didn't know why Eli kept denying that he had called for help. Again Samuel dutifully went back to his post, crawled into bed, and pulled the blanket over him, when **"the LORD called Samuel a third time."** Faithful as ever, Samuel tossed the blanket off, hopped out of bed and went to Eli. **"Here I am; you called me."**

For all his faults and failures, Eli finally understood. The Lord was going to reveal himself through a new prophet. Being a young man in a dark time when that didn't normally happen, Samuel knew nothing about this. Oh, he knew the Lord by faith and trusted in the true God, but the Lord had not revealed to him the special, direct knowledge he gave only to his prophets. **"The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him."** Eli understood, however, and passed on to his young helper the most important lesson of his life: when God speaks, we listen, and God was speaking to Samuel. The Lord was calling Samuel to be his prophet. Eli instructed the young man, **"Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'"** Samuel listened to Eli and returned to his place.

Samuel waited until ***“the LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’”*** The young man humbly responded, ***“Speak, for your servant is listening.”*** Samuel received the Word of God with humility and joy. He trusted that what God spoke was the truth—the “one thing needful”. That response would describe all that Samuel said and did as he served the Lord in Israel for the rest of his life. When God spoke, Samuel listened. He trusted and he obeyed. Nothing else mattered more.

When God speaks through his holy Word, are you listening? How do you receive the Word of God? How do you respond to it? Looking back, it's easy to look down on the people of Israel and their priests. “How foolish were they to not listen to God after he gave them the Promised Land?” “How foolish were they to go through the motions at the tabernacle and let scandal bring contempt on the church?” “How foolish were they to become careless and apathetic with the Word of God, so much so that God even stopped speaking to them?” Tempting to think that, isn't it, but how foolish are we?

The temptation is no different today than it was four thousand years ago to not listen to the Word of God, to be apathetic and careless about it. The temptation is no different today than it was four thousand years ago to respond to the Word of God not with humble trust and joyful obedience, but to look the Lord in the eye and say, “Listen, Lord. Your servant is speaking.”

The temptation is no different today than it was four thousand years ago and neither is the sin. When the Lord speaks through his Word, do you always listen or do you ever find yourself too busy to listen? Do you always accept what he has to say as the truth? Do you always humbly believe and joyfully obey that Word? Have you ever found yourself ignoring what God has to say, thinking you can take care of yourself or you know better? At such times, aren't you really telling the Lord, “Listen, Lord, your servant is speaking.”? You and I are tempted all the time to disregard God's Word carelessly, to not take him at his word, to disagree with what God says in his Word because we don't want to hear it or obey it. For such disregard, we deserve to be deprived of God's Word. We deserve to not only have the good news of our Savior Jesus taken from us, but we deserve to only hear terrifying words of condemnation from our God.

...But that's not what our God has done. In spite of Israel's wickedness, God in his grace raised up a faithful, Spirit-filled messenger to receive that Word and proclaim it clearly again. Samuel had one task—to be the mouthpiece of the Lord, to proclaim his effective Word that changed the hearts of Israel and yanked them out of the depths of their depravity.

God's Word does the same today. The hymnist expressed it beautifully when she wrote, ***“Lord, your words are waters living where I quench my thirsty needs. Lord, your words are bread life-giving; on your words my spirit feeds. Lord, your words will be my light through death's cold and dreary night. Yes, they are my sword prevailing and my cup of joy unfailing.”*** (*Christian Worship* 283:3) How is that possible? Remember who the Word is about. All of Scripture points us to Christ Jesus our Savior. From the creation of the world and the fall into sin to the final amen, it's all about Christ. We find him in the Old Testament showing us how desperately we need a Savior and how God prepared the way for that Savior to come. We find him in the New Testament in our human flesh, living in our place, suffering and dying for our sins, and leaving our grave empty. Here in Holy Scripture we find the perfect, faithful Prophet whom our God raised up to save us, to proclaim the good news we need to hear. “Through me your sins are forgiven. Your warfare is done. Your death is destroyed. Your life is forever.” Here in Holy Scripture, we find the Savior who cared so much about worthless you and me that he gave up everything, even his own life, to cut through our apathy and arrogance to make us ***“God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved...”*** (Colossians 3:12). Because of Christ, we now regard God's Word as the one thing that matters most.

Now when God speaks, we listen humbly like Samuel and joyfully like Mary in the Gospel lesson. By faith in Christ Jesus, created in our hearts by that Word, we humbly recognize the Lord's voice. We don't tell the Lord to listen to us, but with an attitude of trustful obedience, we accept what God speaks as the truth. We believe it and obey. We let that Word ***“dwell richly”*** (Colossians 3:16) in our hearts, letting it not just pay a passing visit, but letting it set up a home in our hearts. We do that through connecting with God's Word in worship, in Bible study and Sunday School, in personal and family devotions at home. By faith, we can be like faithful Samuel and stand humbly before the Lord with the prayer, “Speak, Lord” and the vow, “Your servant is listening.”

When God speaks, we listen and we respond. ***“As I pray, dear Jesus, hear me. Let your words in me take root. May your Spirit e'er be near me that I bear abundant fruit. May I daily sing your praise, from my heart glad anthems raise, till my highest praise is given in the endless joy of heaven.”*** (*Christian Worship* 283:4) Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. Amen.