

Voices in the Night
1 Samuel 3: 1-18
Don Lincoln

We don't often expect the Bible to be funny. But just try reading 1 Samuel 3 without smiling. First of all, the setting is this – Samuel is lying down to sleep in the temple, next to the ark of the covenant – the ark of God – a gold-covered box containing the ten commandment tablets. I'm thinking that HAD to be a spooky place for a young man to be expected to sleep. Go in the temple and sleep next to the big box – the scary one. Little wonder he began to hear voices, or more specifically, a voice calling his name.¹

Anyway, young Samuel is settling in for the night. He hears a voice calling his name and assumes it is the elderly priest, Eli. An obedient kid, Samuel is at Eli's side in a flash, "Here I am, for you called me." But Eli doesn't have a clue what Samuel is talking about and tells the boy to go back to bed. Samuel does as he is told, but just as he gets his pillow fluffed, the voice calls again, "Samuel, Samuel."

As the night goes on, we don't know if Samuel is annoyed with what is going on. The Bible only tells us he again goes to the old man's bedside; two more times! We can imagine his voice tinged with impatience as he says again, "Here I am, FOR YOU CALLED ME...AGAIN!"

You can also imagine the exasperation in Eli's voice the third time Samuel shakes him awake. Any parents in here know the exasperation of hearing the pitter-patter of little feet coming down the stairs for the THIRD time when they're supposed to be in bed?? Oh, they better have a GOOD excuse, right?

But imagine, if Eli's impatient, what of poor obedient Samuel? He knows this is not a creative scam to stay up all night. But it appears he's going to take the rap for someone calling his name in the darkness. You gotta smile!

It's like the Keystone Cops – back and forth!! But before we give Samuel and Eli grief for taking so long to catch up with the Almighty, remember the text's opening verse – 1 Samuel 3, verse 1: "The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."

The LORD has been silent – as only the LORD can be silent. Prophets wouldn't know a vision anymore if it bit them. So who can blame this old man and his young protégé for not having a clue? The word of the LORD was rare. Nobody had heard from God.

Truth be told, when was the last time you heard an audible voice from heaven, whispering to you in the dead of night? Anybody last night? Last month? This past year? Last decade? Ever?

You know, in church we throw around words all the time about God's calling, God's plan for our lives, God's speaking into our hearts – and our response of faith. But how many times have you been awakened by a voice calling "Samuel, Samuel" – or "Susie, Susie" – or whatever name by which God would call you?

Voices speaking to you and me, calling to us – well, that's likely to get us checked in for a couple nights at the local psychiatric center.

Of course if I don't believe God **could** call like He did to Samuel, then I don't have to worry about that kind of invasion in my world, do I? On the other hand, if I **DO** believe God can call like that (which, by the way, I personally do), I am equally comfortable, because as of yet God hasn't spoken audibly in the middle of the night to me. God hasn't left a voice message on my iPhone – heck God hasn't even tweeted or texted or messaged me on Facebook.

And so I can even comfortably say I am listening for God's call in my life, but since I haven't had an audible voice, I guess God doesn't really have a specific need for me to address at the moment like He did Samuel.

But – rest assured, if I DO see a burning bush, or wrestle with an Angel, or find a few stone tablets on a fishing trip in the Poconos, then maybe I'll consider asking God what He has in mind for me.

So – I've preached that message before about this text. About listening for God's call. And my willingness to dismiss it. And not listen for it. And how the call comes to us. All of us. So listen....

Or how God doesn't always call in big, giant, miraculous, Cecil-B-Demille-kind-of-fireworks-and-pyrotechnics-ways. The reformers like John Calvin and Martin Luther didn't talk about voices in the night. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call – if you read it – was actually a very subtle call, first thinking he was to be a doctor, then a lawyer, before he finally got to the ministry. Billy Graham – I don't remember him talking about voices at night.

I've always talked about Samuel and his call in the text, but this week God once again messed with me and said, "You don't need to preach about Samuel; you need to preach about Eli."

It struck me this week that we, who are wise from experience – but whose sight is failing, eyes are growing dim; whose spirit is less able; constitution is more rigid, less flexible; yet still willing, possibly open to being used by God – might actually be called like Eli to help some young, up-and-comer listen and receive God's word, and then actually listen to what they have to say. Might that be a possibility? Might that be something I ought to ponder?

I've always thought about this text by relating to Samuel – after all – I've had a "call to ministry." But I heard something new this week. Perhaps Eli is the one I need to identify with.

You see, Eli's a mess. And Eli's sons are a mess. We learn in previous chapters that Eli's sons are corrupt; out of control; they have been irresponsible with the religious authority they have been granted by being sons of the priest. Religious structure has become a vehicle for personal gain and pleasure, betraying God's call and trust. And Eli has been complicit. Eli has not restrained those sons. Inadequate attention to his own household and disregard for God's plan will prove fatal.

But, it's not just about Eli.

Eli's country is a mess. Samuel's call from God comes in a time of spiritual desolation, religious corruption, political danger and social upheaval. The word of the Lord is rare; the Philistines are about to threaten Israel's survival; the pressures of the people wanting to be like other nations – to “have a king” like the rest of the lands will soon grow to overwhelming. The nation is a mess.

If that context sounds too harsh, so too sounds the message Samuel brings from God.² God tells Samuel the message will make BOTH ears tingle – BOTH ears of anybody who hears it.

I've always read this text focused on the idyllic, childlike exchange of Samuel and Eli – you called; no I didn't; you called; no I didn't; you called; Oh – must be the Lord, go tell him your servant is listening. I've always ended the story there.

But there is nothing idyllic or childlike about the message Samuel is given to deliver – the substance of the message is hard, abrasive and devastating.³ The message is to Eli and the message is, “Eli, you're done. You and your household are finished because you've been disobedient.” God's word sometimes comes harshly – condemns our current practices and what we conveniently overlook.

In fact, we know from history nearly every commissioning of a prophet is for some crushing burden. There is bad news to deliver; a foreign ruler is preparing to invade; there is the current local king who has abandoned the God of Israel and gone chasing after other gods, there are people who have turned their back on God and who are about to be called to account.⁴

God prepares once again to speak the divine Word into a world still bent on ignoring Him.

And that is the context – that is when Eli finds some young whipper-snapper whispering in his ear at night saying, “I hear a voice.”

And – thanks be to God – Eli listens. Samuel waits until morning to tell him – he knows it's not good news – but Eli insists – “Give it to me. All of it. Tell me the truth.”

You know where this took me? I found myself reflecting on when the word of the Lord came into the world, into the church, into a culture, into a nation through some whipper-snapper. John Calvin was 26 when he wrote his Institutes of the Christian religion,

transforming the Protestant Reformation. How many 26 year olds am I going to listen to? I have a 34 and 30 year old – 26? Are you kidding?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was 28 years old when he and several other pastors put together the Declaration of Barmen and started the Confession Church in opposition to the Nazi's in Germany in 1934. Age TWENTY-EIGHT!!

It was four teenagers who sat at a Woolworths lunch counter where they weren't supposed to sit in Greensboro, NC in 1960. Four teenagers who helped change the world – or at least helped start the change that still needs to be lived in its fullness.

Student rallies in Soweto, South Africa encouraged the anti-apartheid movement.

I remember the image on TV of a young student standing in front of tanks in Tiananmen Square; and students in Czechoslovakia, who in the non-violent, Velvet revolution toppled a communist regime in that nation in weeks.

So what happened to me with this text this week is that I realized **THIS** Eli - whose hearing probably isn't quite as good as it once was, whose eyesight is a little dim – has to ponder: Is it possible the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School – and the “enough is enough” movement – are speaking a prophetic word into the public square? Is it possible the young people stirred by the Black Lives Matter have a word from the Lord to speak into the mess of our lives, the continued prejudice and racism in our nation and in our world?

Sure – like Eli – I may be able to help them understand or interpret what's happening – where this message is coming from – but I also need to be the Eli who is willing to hear from them their share of the truth.

I have to remember, that at 45 years of age when I started as the pastor here at Westminster – I was the OLDEST head of staff ever to start at Westminster. At 45. The OLDEST. Every other pastor started in their 20's and 30's. Really? I'm not sure I would have listened to them.

In a day when a 68 year old televangelist informs his congregation that God may be suggesting he needs a new Falcon 7X – a \$56 million dollar jet – perhaps it's time for me and all of us to listen more closely to what the young whipper-snappers are saying. That together we might discern and hear what God is saying to the Church and to the world. And be willing to listen for the truth of God's word as it is revealed. May it be so. AMEN.

1. John Rollefson, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, Commentary on 1 Samuel 3.
2. Bruce Birch, New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Vol II, Commentary on Samuel.
3. Walter Brueggemann, Interpretation Commentary on 1 & 2 Samuel.
4. James O. Duke, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, Commentary on 1 Samuel 3.