

Listening Vertically
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1 Samuel 3:1-10, John 1:43-51

Sometimes it seems like God spoke to EVERYONE in the days of the Bible.

Except for those times when God went silent, like when Samuel was a boy.

Of course, it was different for his grandparent's generation whom God freed from slavery in Egypt. They made their way through the wilderness because God showed up as a pillar of smoke by day and fire by night. God fed them manna from heaven, and dictated the law of the covenant to Moses on Mount Zion and taught them how to worship.

To honor God, they built a tent called a Tabernacle which served as a portable sanctuary. Inside was the Ark of the Covenant; a big ornate box containing the Ten Commandments and designed to look like a throne. There was an altar near the opening for burning sacrifices. The job of the priests, all of whom were descendants of Aaron, was to burn offerings and say prayers for the people. And it was a good job!

When the Israelites finally moved into the Promised Land, they put the Tabernacle up in Shilo where it stayed for a very long time. The people put down spiritual roots, they got into a routine, the temporary became stable.

Over time, the community's relationship with God declined. Their grandchildren were no longer hearing God's voice. It was hard to listen - what with so many other things vying for their attention!

Religious Awakenings - then and now - seem to come in cycles. There are periods when God's people hear God speak and see God at work, their prayer lives become active, it's all very exciting. And then after a generation or two afterward, people get complacent, systems become corrupt and communities of believers enter a quiet period. Calvin, Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers, used this narrative to describe the need for a spiritual revolution.

The slump always seems to begin when no one is noticing. The sanctuaries are full of people, calendars are busy, rituals are followed religiously. But somehow the power of healing and transformation that comes through direct encounters with God diminishes. Worship becomes a habit.

It also becomes horizontal... people start noticing what's alongside them... the children are cute, the pastor's stole is lopsided, the prayer concerns are too long... and they fail to notice the presence of the living God.

And that which is supposed to transform and inspire becomes safe and tame and predictable.

But ... God is still speaking, and God will call out again and again until someone hears and responds, perhaps someone the community would never expect...

Samuel was a young boy who worked as an apprentice for the chief priest, Eli. Eli is an interesting character, in that he seems to be both sympathetic and pathetic at the same time. The old priest suffered impaired vision, he was also spiritually blind to the problems around him that would lead to his eventual downfall.

Eli has a problem with his sons, who were also priests. In the previous chapter they are described as "*despicable*" men. What made them so despicable was greed. In those days, Priests were not paid in money, because there was no money. They couldn't work in the fields, but the law made it possible for the priest and his family to eat by taking a portion of the sacrificial animals. The problem with Eli's sons was that they took more than was allowed. The two men were drunk with power and used it in ways that hurt others and robbed God. Eli urged his sons to stop their abuses, but it seems that simply saying something wasn't enough.

When we start today's reading, Samuel is sleeping in the temple, with Eli nearby. He is basically an intern, learning the ropes. As he is trying to sleep, he hears a voice calling him. Each time he comes to Eli thinking the voice he heard was the old priests. Eli didn't realize at first that this might be God.

When God calls again, Samuel is able to say that he is open to receive God's word. It's then that Samuel hears the word of God and what a word it is. He learns about Eli and his sons' sins and their upcoming downfall.

After hearing God, Samuel wasn't able to sleep. He got up the next morning and attended to his duties, trying to avoid his boss.

If you have ever had to tell someone that you work for the truth about the company, you can relate to the knot in young Samuel's stomach. How could he tell his boss what lay in store for him and his sons due to his own bad decisions and poor leadership?

Finally, Eli asks Samuel to tell him what God said. To his credit, old Eli hears and understands. The center of gravity shifts. Eli and his sons may still be in power, at least on paper. But God had chosen Samuel and people would now pay attention to him.

Sometimes we expect God to speak in only one way – if it's not a voice from a cloud in heaven we don't recognize it as divine. But Eli was an unusual adult: wise enough to hear the message of God delivered by a child without automatically dismissing him. My experience has taught me that young people are able to hear God's voice quite on their own, but they also benefit from the wisdom of elders to help interpret what it is they hear.

In our reading from John today, some were surprised to think that Jesus could be the Messiah, merely because of where he was from. Why should anyone listen to him? Why on earth would they follow? Nazareth was a teensy, tiny out of the way backwater town with nothing to offer anyone. Certainly the savior of the people could not come from there! The Son of God should come from a place with power and strength, not Nazareth!

And yet, God still used a young boy and a man from Nazareth to tell others what they need to hear.

Listening takes time. Our Western New England culture isn't keen on spending time just being quiet. Our brains have become accustomed to constant distraction, so we go to our cellphones and numb ourselves. But we need time to be quiet. We need time to reflect. We need time to read passages of scripture and let the word of God sink deeply into our souls. We need to learn to listen vertically in a society that is accustomed to listening horizontally.

I wonder some days; will I know God's voice if I hear it? Is it loud? Soft? Male? Female? Or is it in the breeze? Is it audible at all? Is it in nature or music or art? Is it in the innocent question of a child discovering life? Or in the sleepless nights we all spend from time to time. Is God's voice in the wise advice from someone who has lived many years? Is it in the whispered response of someone unable to speak up? Is it in the tears of someone in pain and distress?

I believe that listening to God is best done in community. When we are regularly connected to other disciples, we grow trusted friendships which help us be open and honest and talk about what we think we hear God

saying. Faithful friends can help us discern what's real and true and not just what we think we want to hear.

I recently heard about a church that held a bit of a social experiment, sending its members out one at a time to walk the streets of a city, praying as they went. One nice church lady was sent out with \$1.50 in her pocket. She wandered around for about 4 hours and then bought some milk and a candy bar which she consumed as she walked.

Sometime later, she sat down on a park bench next to a man who appeared to be homeless. He smelled and was pretty dirty but she was too tired to care. Eventually, the man asked her what she was doing walking around the neighborhood. She explained that she was from a church and that she was on a prayer walk.

The man smiled and told her that most homeless people believe in God because they had no one else to cry to in the night.

As they continued to chat together, the woman realized she was a little cold and thirsty but she also remembered that she had spent the money in her pocket. As she rubbed her arms trying to stay warm, the man got up and shuffled down the street. She waited a few minutes, and was thinking about where she would walk to next when she saw him return with two hot cups of coffee, which they drank together over more conversation.

The nice church lady learned a lot that cold afternoon about generosity and hospitality and listening.

Throughout scripture, God spoke to the least likely people. Society is ever changing who is acceptable and who is not, but God's love doesn't change - no matter what one has or has not done in his or her life.

But what are we to do? We might start by putting aside our petitions and our requests, and simply tell God, *'speak, for your servant is listening'*. We might start by trying to see ourselves as Jesus sees us: valuable allies for peace, and love, and forgiveness in the world. As worthy helpers in the effort to make the world a better place – both as individuals and as a church community.

And in those efforts, our shortcomings and our mistakes don't have any relevance: we can truly begin again every time we interact with another of God's children. We can choose to be ambassadors of peace and love and forgiveness. Are you ready and willing? Amen.