

1 Samuel 3:1-20

- Narrator:** 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. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 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. Then the Lord called,
- The Lord:** Samuel! Samuel!
- Samuel:** Here I am!
- Narrator:** Samuel ran to Eli.
- Samuel:** Here I am, for you called me.
- Eli:** I did not call; lie down again.
- Narrator:** So he went and lay down. The Lord called again.
- The Lord:** Samuel!
- Narrator:** Samuel got up and went to Eli.
- Samuel:** Here I am, for you called me.
- Eli:** I did not call, my son. Lie down again.”
- Narrator:** Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli.
- Samuel:** Here I am, for you called me.
- Narrator:** Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy.
- Eli:** Go, lie down; and if the voice calls you again, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’
- Narrator:** So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before,
- The Lord:** Samuel! Samuel!
- Samuel:** Speak, for your servant is listening. *Silence*
- The Lord:** Behold, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 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. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever. *Silence*
- Narrator:** 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. But Eli called Samuel.
- Eli:** Samuel, my son.
- Samuel:** Here I am.
- Eli:** What did God say to 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.
- Narrator:** Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him.
- Eli:** It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.

Narrator: As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. *Silence*

TRAINING OUR EARS

1. We're in week 2 of the "Arise" worship series, a series that focuses on us, both as individuals and as a church, preparing our hearts to RISE UP, to carry the torch so to speak, and lead others in the ways of Jesus Christ. Last week we affirmed that God is speaking to us, and the first thing that he says to us is that *we are his beloved children* – he says it not only in words but in deeds, giving us life to live, people to love, gifts to share. We have to believe that we are God's beloved children if we expect ourselves to listen to whatever else he has to say to us.
2. And God has a lot to say to us – not all such nice things as "You're my child and I love you," but what God says to us, good or bad, he says because he loves us. The problem is that we are not always excited about hearing what God has to say to us. I sincerely believe that if everyone was open to listen to God and obey God we would have wars or famine or greed or corruption. We'd have justice and we'd have peace. So much of the history that we read in the Old Testament is about tragedy that befalls Israel because Israel fails to listen to God.
3. Today's scripture passage gives us a very positive message nonetheless, a message that can help us become better listeners of God. I want to focus on our two main characters in our scripture lesson, Eli and Samuel, in order to illustrate how we hear God or fail to hear God. In this way you may be able to recognize some of the things that get in the way of our hearing God's word. The point will be to encourage you to train your ears to hear God, either directly or indirectly. And I'll begin with a little story about a woman who grew up in rural Virginia who came to visit a friend in New York City. It was springtime, and they were walking down 7th Avenue in midtown when the woman from Virginia stopped, walked to a narrow alleyway where there was a trashcan and said to her city friend, "Listen!" Her friend tuned her ear to the alleyway and soon recognized that there was a cricket somewhere in or behind the trashcan, chirping. Her friend was astounded.

"Wow! How could you hear that cricket amidst all the noise on the street?" she asked.

"It's easy," the woman responded. "It's all a matter of what you're listening to."

Then, to demonstrate, she went into her coin purse and pulled out two quarters and dropped them on the sidewalk. People nearly tripped over each other as some of them stopped and turned their heads down to the sidewalk.

4. It's all a matter of what you're listening to. Today's reading starts with the narrator explaining to us that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days." That doesn't mean that God was absent, but rather that God was like the cricket in the story I just shared with you; he was there, and making noise, but people were not paying attention. The story comes not long after Moses has led the children of Israel out of Egypt and his successor Joshua has led them into the land of Canaan. Israel is not yet a nation but rather a confederation of 12 tribes all unified by worship of the same God, Yahweh. There is no temple, and Jerusalem is still a city ruled by a tribe called the Jebusites. So the Israelites worship in the Tabernacle, the mobile church that God instructed them to build in the wilderness, and Eli is their chief priest. Samuel is a miracle child; his mother Hannah was barren, and prayed and wept, and God granted her a son, Samuel. And Hannah dedicated Samuel to God – he would not drink alcohol nor receive a haircut.

5. Now keep in mind that Israel's God is a God of Justice; he gave them laws to keep, laws that ensure that there is justice. But Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who are like assistant priests, are corrupt, and we can guess that a lot of people had lost faith in God as a result, or they had gone off to look for God in other religions. Think of your own journey in faith; how many of you have come to this church having been to other churches where you might have been disillusioned (and how many may now be at other churches having been disillusioned by this church)? And the leaders are the most important factors in that; if that pastor or the priest is corrupt, people will leave. If the lay leaders of the church are not zealous about the church and its ministries, people will go elsewhere. People will wander trying to find a place where they can hear God until they find that place where they can hear God or they stay home having given up on hearing God. Do you think that the word of the Lord is rare these days? Have people given up on ever hearing God in the church? Have their ears been trained to pursue other gods like the quarters that are dropped on the sidewalk? The cricket hasn't stopped chirping, but have we given up trying to hear it?
6. Eli the priest, had almost lost his ability to see – I think there's a metaphor there; he was nearly blind physically, but he was also nearly blind spiritually, just as he was nearly deaf spiritually. His sons had ruined his reputation and had caused a lot of folks to be disillusioned about their God. To put it in modern terms, Eli's church was nearly dead. But God had given him a very special gift in Samuel, his apprentice, a young boy dedicated to God from before birth. Samuel was just what the people needed to revive their church and get things back on track. And what is amazing is how God worked through both Eli and Samuel to save the church. So our first lesson about hearing God is that **WE NEED EACH OTHER TO HEAR GOD'S WORD**. Eli knows what a cricket is, but he can't hear it. Samuel hears the cricket, but he doesn't know what it is. So they actually need each other to receive a word from God. The same holds true for us. While we may not be ready or willing to hear God's voice, sometimes it can be clear to us when God is speaking to someone else. Our own faith may be weak, but we can still encourage others to greater faith.
7. Now part of Eli's problem with hearing God has to do with what God needs to tell him. We don't like bad news particularly when it has to do with us. We all have an aversion to strong criticism. Eli doesn't *want* to hear what God has to say to him: "Mr. Eli, your sons are disrupting our worship. They are stealing lunch money from the other children of Israel." A lot of parents would be in denial; "No, not my child." So often we don't want to hear what God has to say to us, and so like Eli we simply won't hear it, at least not directly from God.
8. But we can thank God for his persistence; even if we won't listen to God directly, God will use someone else to speak to us, and God uses Samuel to speak to Eli, and herein lies the second lesson: **WE SHOULD APPRECIATE THAT GOD OFTEN COMMUNICATES TO PEOPLE OTHER THAN US**. We should give Eli some credit, because even though he is deaf to God's direct word he is able to recognize that God is trying to speak to his apprentice Samuel, and rather than mislead Samuel by telling him he's hallucinating or dreaming, Eli tells Samuel that it is indeed God who is speaking to him and he should pay attention to what God has to say to him. That took courage, because Eli was the one to whom God should have been speaking; he was the big cheese. But Eli had the humility to see that someone else was taking his place, that he had lost his authority, and rather than impede his replacement he helped Samuel hear the word of God. And then he demanded that Samuel tell him what God had told him, as bad as the news was – and I think Eli expected bad news.

All of us should take a cue from Eli, because we've all chosen at times to ignore the cricket, but at least Eli recognized that the cricket was still there. Some people never learn what the

cricket is and never pay any attention to it, and so they have no faith. And loss of faith leads downward to cynicism and despondence. The world is a screwed up place and it's only getting worse. They don't believe in a loving God, and so they themselves can't love, and so the world continues to get worse and worse. Are we able, like Eli, to admit that God is still speaking even if we can't hear him, even if we're not the ones receiving the message? That takes a great deal of humility.

But Eli shouldn't feel too bad, because, God does communicate to him in order to get Samuel to listen to God's word; Indirectly God tells Eli, "I'm trying to say something Samuel," and Eli does the right thing by telling Samuel to respond to God by saying, "Your servant is listening, Lord." God is still using Eli, but more as an assistant and not as the main actor.

9. Finally, we should also take a cue from Samuel. **WE SHOULD BE WILLING TO LISTEN AND TO PROCLAIM.** When informed that it is God's voice speaking to him, Samuel is willing to listen. I'm not sure that I would have been eager to listen if I were in Samuel's sandals. "Matt, the voice that you heard three times was none other than God. When you hear it again, ask it to speak." I might have put some ear buds in and cranked up the volume on my Ipod. I might have thought that Eli is a man of questionable morals or intelligence and thus ignore his instructions. Samuel had enough faith in Eli to do as he was instructed, to respond to the voice of God and listen.

Of course if God speaks to you, you can be pretty sure that what he tells you is not meant to be kept in, because God is a cricket – he's constantly chirping even though most people are not paying attention. God wants everyone to hear him. So if you are the lucky one that gets the message right from the horse's mouth (or the cricket's legs), then you need to speak up. YOU NEED TO PROCLAIM what God says to you, and that's not always pleasant. Samuel spoke frankly to Eli. I'm reminded of that scene in *It's a Wonderful Life* where a young George Bailey is working for a pharmacist, Mr Gower, who has a drinking problem and mistakenly fills a child's prescription with poison. George recognizes this and ends up not delivering the drug, only to be beaten by Mr. Gower. He explains to the pharmacist that he mistakenly sent poison to the child, and a very remorseful Mr. Gower apologizes profusely to George. That's not easy, to tell someone you care about information that's going to upset them. It's especially not easy when you're a child telling it to an adult; you might get your ears boxed. But saying nothing will lead to nothing, no positive change. If George had not told Mr. Gower about his mistake, he might have poisoned the next sick child. Who knows; maybe Samuel's words to Eli made Eli become a better priest and a better listener to God.

So to summarize,

1. Know that we need each other to hear God's word.
2. Appreciate that God may communicate more clearly to others than he does to us, and be okay with that.
3. When God is speaking to you, be willing to listen and to proclaim.

As I said, God is always speaking; the problem is that people are not usually listening. Take heart that you can and will hear God when you are ready and able to. This means that you have to set aside the things that distract you, including your own pride. Be ready to hear God in one another, and be willing to proclaim what he tells you, even when it hurts.