

When the Call is Difficult
I Samuel 3:1-20
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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The night drew on. Sleep had been a companion for some time but the night wasn't over yet. Morning was still a while off and his body was trying to eek out the most rest it could. But something stirred around him...or maybe within him...he wasn't sure, but a voice woke him.

"It must be Eli," he thought as he hurried to his mentor's side.

"How can I help? What do you need?" he asked the sleeping priest. But it was clear that Eli had not called.

"It must have been a dream," he concluded as he made his way back to his sleeping mat.

But then it happened again. Just as he dozed off, that same voice...those same words. He was still groggy from sleep. He wasn't sure what to think. But he needed to check. He couldn't leave Eli without help if something was wrong.

The sound of Eli's slow, deep breaths told him he had fallen swiftly back to sleep.

"Did you call?" he asked hesitantly.

Eli had not. But ever so patient, Eli simply sent him back to bed saying, "Try to get some sleep, child. Morning will come soon enough."

So, he returned to his mat and lay down. Even though morning wasn't far off, it was far enough away that his body was happy to sleep. And his groggy mind was happy to allow it.

A few breaths later and he was snoring.

But then it happened again.

He knew Eli well enough to know the old man wasn't playing tricks on him. If nothing else, Eli liked his own sleep too well for that. But what was going on?

For the third time he walked to Eli's room. "Sir, was that you? I heard you calling?"

Suddenly it was as if a light of recognition shone in the room. "It is Yahweh," Eli said. "It must be. Go, quickly, return to your bed. Wait. Listen. If it is God, you will hear the voice again. This time don't come to me but simply respond. Let Yahweh know you are there. Hear what God has to say to you."

And so, the boy went. With a swiftness that was not present earlier. In fact, he hoped he didn't have to go back to sleep to hear the voice again because he wasn't sure he could now.

Could Eli be right? Could Yahweh, the God of his ancestors, the God to whom his mother dedicated her son, could that God be calling on him?

But why? What might God want? What was going on?

With a combination of excitement and anxiety, he lay back down, staring into the dark, aware of the small beam of light radiating from the lamp of God.

Should he close his eyes?

Should he keep them open?

Would it sound the same?

How would he know?

But before this litany of questions could run through his mind, there it was again.

"Samuel, Samuel." And he answered, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening".

And in that action...in that response...in that moment...everything changed.

Samuel's story may seem dramatic to us. It may seem like something of old when people seem to have experienced God in a different way. It may leave us wondering why God no longer appears in the ways we read about in the Bible – audible voices, burning bushes, and more. It

may leave us wondering if these things ever really happened. It may leave us wondering why God's communication plan has seemingly changed.

And yet, it seems that across time and space, across various experiences, people of faith have and continue to work to listen to the voice of God. And it seems that as people of faith we understand that we are to listen to God in order to live in God's ways.

Perhaps rather than wondering about the differences between our lives and the life of Samuel...perhaps rather than being jealous (or maybe for some us, more relieved than jealous) that God doesn't present in the same way...perhaps we can instead learn something from all that we hold in common with Samuel.

See, there is something refreshing in the way the story tells us that Samuel heard this voice three times and each time could only imagine that it was the voice of his mentor, Eli. Of course, the writer of I Samuel introduces this story saying, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."¹ The reality is that while the people of Israel were working to be faithful, no one was sitting around waiting for God to speak directly to them. Instead they were simply working to trust the wisdom of their ancestors, the stories of their faith, the leaders who were serving in the temple and synagogues, and to make sense of their lives in light of those. And so, for Samuel, having been raised in the temple since he was a young child, the voice of greatest authority in his life was that of his mentor, Eli. Of course he would think it was Eli who was calling.

And while some, even while granting grace to Samuel, may criticize Eli for not recognizing the voice of God immediately, perhaps that is refreshing as well. Remember, Eli, too, was living in this context where people were simply not hearing God. And so, he wasn't

¹ I Samuel 3:1b, NRSV.

losing sleep each night waiting for this to change. He was simply doing the best he could do as a priest, as a servant, as a mentor, in spite of what wasn't happening.

And I invite you to find that refreshing. Because which one of us hasn't wondered? Which one of us hasn't hoped to do the right thing, to follow in God's ways, but been confused about how to discern for certain what voice belongs to God and what ways God would have us go?

Especially within the reality that we hear people of faith on both sides of nearly every topic or question using language from their faith to defend their positions, we are left wondering how we know that it is God. And, while many people of faith look to the Bible for help, the reality is that there, too, we get mixed messages. There is a sentence in that good old book that can defend anything. Sometimes it is because of the reality that the Bible is authored by many people across many times and situations. Sometimes it is because when we are looking for a defense we simply take a convenient sentence out of context and use it for our own purposes. Sometimes it is because as the understanding grew and developed and as the people of faith came to greater understanding and faithfulness, they were able to discern God more clearly.

The reality is that across the ages people have struggled to hear God, to listen to God, and to know when it is God rather than being the voice of a favorite mentor or simply the answer they want to hear.

And yet, even in the face of the struggles to do so, this story invites us to keep on listening. It invites us to be open to God moving in a new way. It invites us to be aware of the messages that God might send and to be ready and willing to respond.

But, as if discernment of the voice of God alone isn't difficult enough, this story doesn't leave the challenge there. Rather, it also reminds us that once we listen to God we might find

that the way we are being called, the way we are being challenged, the things that are being asked of us are not easy.

Often when we read this story we focus only on the first ten verses, ending our reading with Samuel's answer, "Speak, for your servant is listening."² And then we get a lovely story of a child being called by God. We turn it into simply a call story – the pivot point where Samuel becomes the primary voice speaking to the people on behalf of God. And that part of the story has value. But it is not complete.

Because when we read on, what we hear is that listening to God, being willing to respond to God, is risky business.

Did you hear what God told Samuel? Samuel was given a message of doom for the family of Eli. Eli, who by all evidence, though not having good control over the choices of his sons, had been a good mentor and priest in the life of Samuel. And yet, what Samuel heard was a disappointing word for the one from whom he learned and looked up to. What a difficult thing for anyone to hear. And what a difficult thing for him to share.

And we hear his hesitation in this passage. He was not eager to get up in the morning. Had he been given the opportunity, he might have avoided Eli all day. And yet, Eli approached him and gave him permission to share even a difficult message. And Eli, with great grace, received the word that had come to Samuel.

So, besides a story of ancient people of faith, what do we hear in this passage?

We hear that we are to be listening for the voice of God. We might not recognize it at first. It might come in ways and times we least expect. But, we are called to have an openness, a readiness to receive it.

² | Samuel 3:10b, NRSV.

We also hear that we are called to be brave and to take the risk to share what we understand God to have said. Sometimes the message of God is not a message we want to hear or want to share. Sometimes it comes in conflict with our cultural values or our personal convictions. Sometimes the call of God is difficult. And still we are invited to answer.

And we are given the gift of doing this in community. Throughout this story, Samuel was not alone. He was able to identify the voice of God because Eli helped him. He was able to find courage because Eli created space for this difficult word.

When we live together in community, we share this responsibility with each other. We can listen together. We can help one another discern. We can create space, even for words that challenge us – and as a people who say that all are welcome and who have a membership that falls across theological, political, and social spectrums, we will be challenged by one another. But in community, we are invited to hear, to receive, to discern, and to work together to create space for God's difficult and wonderful, life-giving and heart-stopping word.

May it be so.