

Care of the Soul: Speak, Lord, For Your Servant is Listening

1 Samuel: 3:1-10

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To me, the prophet Samuel will always be Hannah's son. Hannah had been trying to conceive for many years and had become quite depressed and distraught. One day, while visiting the temple, after much weeping and fervent prayer, Hannah made a vow to the Lord that if she bore a son, she would give him to the Lord for all the days of his life. And indeed, Samuel was born. True to her word, after weaning him, she then presented him to the priest Eli. Samuel then grew up in the presence of the Lord ministering under Eli. One night young Samuel heard a voice calling him; it was the Lord. Now, if there's anyone that should have been able to hear the audible voice of God I think it should have been Hannah's son Samuel. The Lord then continued to speak to and through Samuel who went on to become a great prophet and judge over Israel.

It wasn't just Samuel who was able to hear the audible voice of God though, Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, the prophets, and so many others in the Hebrew Bible heard God's voice usually giving them direct instructions. But then God came down to earth to dwell among us and to be in direct relationship with us, God incarnate—in human form—as Jesus. In the Gospels, we only hear of the audible voice of God three times—at Jesus' baptism, the Transfiguration, and before Jesus' crucifixion. After his departure, the early church received the gift of the Holy Spirit, the ever-present advocate, comforter, and intercessor; the Spirit of Peace and Truth; the worker of miracles; the energy of divine Love; and the third part of the Trinity, the Godhead.

As people of faith seeking to know the triune God, we yearn to be able to have some sense of God communicating with us, maybe not an audible voice, but at least a sense of God's presence and also guidance, especially during challenging times. And I really don't think it can get any more challenging than these past two years. Without realizing it, in March 2020 the world we knew and understood abruptly ended and became a historical era BC - before Covid. Many of us were forced to let go of the life we had planned without knowing what exactly we were heading into. This brought on feelings of powerlessness and also grief. And here we are, still in a season where change is our only constant, a liminal season between what was and what is yet to come.

People across the globe have been questioning their life's purpose, career choices, relationships, and priorities, and asking questions like: What is important to me? Who am I meant to be? Who do I want to spend my time with? What do I want to do with the rest of my life? I recently came across a short Wendell Berry poem called "Our Real Work." I'm going to read it for us:

*"It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings."*

I wonder if our real work is seeking and depending on God as we journey through this liminal season. We were created to be in communion with God. God is with us and within us, and so the work is for us to become aware of God's presence. With a spirit of trust, some curiosity, and a lot of patience, we can figure out how to tune into our inner knower and understand how God may be speaking to us in ways that we understand. The process of listening for God tends to be highly personal, and so what works for one may not work for another.

If we have an internal voice that is judging, condemning, or that we fear, this is not God. God's call is loving, invitational, and lifegiving. It is also not God if the situation or choice we are discerning may be harmful or if there are feelings of resentment around it. God is not a demanding taskmaster. God wants what is best for us. We will know that it is God if deep in our gut it feels right, if we then feel a sense of peace after we make a decision. With repeated coincidences or synchronicities, and confirmatory experiences over time, what I call God moments, our internal knower becomes fine-tuned. Hearing from God is not easy. Fortunately we don't have to do any of this alone. Friends, families, and religious communities consciously or unconsciously can help each other hear from God. Have you ever had someone randomly tell you something you really needed to hear at that moment? Or has someone very powerfully named gifts or qualities that then totally opened your mind to new possibilities?

Music can be another way that we might hear from God. I remember watching TV alone late one night in 2010. I was in a season of discernment at the time. To cut a very long story short, a music video came on which had a combination of lyrics and images that caused my heart to get tugged in all sorts of strange ways. I remember thinking "I can do more. I will do more." And so I did. I didn't realize this at the time, but it turns out this was one of those "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" moments. Listening to meaningful music is one of the languages in which I feel God speaks to me, and so I love coming across references to music in the Bible. The Psalms are actually sacred songs or poems which were originally intended to be sung accompanied by a stringed instrument. And as you know, the Psalms convey a strong sense of conversational intimacy with God, and contain the full range of emotional expression and have the expectation that God will speak to, and work in the Psalmist's favor.

The Psalms are also rich with nature imagery, like Psalm 104: "How many are your works, LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures."

Have you ever had the experience of wrestling with a problem or decision and then you go out for a walk somewhere beautiful and all of a sudden you have a solution? Or have you been so mesmerized by nature that you forget all your worries and come away with a clarity and a new perspective? Nature can be a way that we sense God speaking to us, reminding us that we are a part of something so much greater than our individual worries; we are a part of God's huge and good creation. Nature is healing. There are groups of people at our church, the nature-loving, walking and talking-prayer people, who meet regularly in a different park and walk and pray together. Look for their Facebook group FUMC Connected in Nature if you would like to join them. There's a quadruple bonus there: nature, community, exercise, and prayer. They will be walking later today.

After my season of discernment, I then started my ministry journey by training to be a Spiritual Director. Spiritual Directors journey with people as they seek to understand how God may be working in their lives and support individuals in deepening their relationship with God.

Spiritual Directors can help us understand how and when God may be speaking to us. They can also help with discernment and questions around vocation, purpose and calling. Amy Kennedy is currently training to be a spiritual director, and so if you would like to learn more or are interested in being connected with a spiritual director, email Amy and she will be very glad to tell you more.

What we are all doing here right now at this moment is very significant. I recently read an article from the UK Church Times. The results of a survey revealed that during the initial days of the pandemic, Christian theology, reflected in belief and practices, led to spiritual awakening rather than to loss of faith, among committed churchgoers. They reported that when forced to migrate from their local churches to online worship, committed churchgoers flourished best when they were actively engaged in worship services. So of course I'm very grateful for all of you watching this now. One of the other ways that we can hear from God is during worship. Some other ways are during times of silent prayer and solitude, reflection on Scripture, Communion, other rituals, and many other ways. What is important is for you to discern which ways work best for you.

Our work as a community of faith is to support each other as we listen for God, to stay open and receptive, to be patient, to try new things, and to find regular spiritual practices that resonate with our soul. We will then be able to depend on God's guidance in this liminal season, and also work collectively to follow God's will and make this world a better place in whatever way we can. Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.

Amen