

“I Am Listening”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning 1 Samuel 3:1-10  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco  
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The story of Samuel’s call began long before Samuel ever heard a word. The story began before Samuel was even born, before he even existed in his mother’s womb.

Samuel first existed in his mother’s heart, long before she conceived. For years and years Hannah could not conceive. For years her child was a mere wish, a monthly hope, a coveted figment of her imagination. Hannah’s husband had two wives, and the other wife bore many children.

Imagine the pain of infertility compounded by children born under your own roof, running around the house, bearing your husband’s name and your husband’s resemblance, while you remain childless. And so it was that the first call in the book of Samuel was Hannah’s call to God.

She was at the temple praying silently and with such fervor that when Eli, the priest, saw her, he assumed she must be drunk! It must have been something like a good Catholic stumbling across a Pentecostal in prayer—no other explanation but intoxication made sense to him. And so at first he tried to correct her. Here’s the actual quote from the Bible: “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.”

But Hannah insisted, “No, my lord, I am but a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord.”

Eli mistook what he saw, but Hannah persisted. She had prayed this prayer before without response, but Hannah prevailed. Hannah was the first in this story to call out and keep calling.

At last God listened. Hannah conceived. Samuel was born, and true to the promise she made in the temple that day Eli thought her drunk, Hannah dedicated her firstborn to the Lord. She told her husband what she was going to do with Samuel, and he answered her, “Do what you think is best.” So after Samuel was weaned, Hannah traveled back to the temple, back to Eli, and left Samuel there to serve the Lord. Every time she returned to the temple, she would bring Samuel a new garment she had sewn for him.

Given the spiritual fervor of his mother, it is no wonder that young Samuel was prone to hearing God’s voice. Samuel was not around for the years of infertility. All he knew was his own story—how his birth was the result of a God who listened and a mother who prayed.

Aside from his miracle birth, there didn’t seem to be a whole lot of divine activity going on in Israel. Our story today began this way, “The word of the Lord was scarce and vision infrequent.” Communication between God and God’s people had just about dried up.

It is so interesting to me what the narrator says next: “Eli was asleep in his usual place. His eyes had lately grown so weak that he could not see. The lamp of God was not yet extinguished.” The narrator describes physical realities: 1. Eli was asleep. 2. His eyes were weak. 3. The lamp of God was not yet extinguished. But perhaps each physical reality pointed beyond itself to a spiritual reality: 1. Eli was asleep. 2. His eyes were weak. 3. The lamp of God was not yet extinguished. The imagery seems too poignant to miss. In a time when God’s word was scarce and vision infrequent, God’s priest was asleep and weak in the eyes. We also know from 1 Samuel 2 that God was not too pleased with Eli’s leadership because his sons, who also served as priests, were very corrupt. But despite the corruption and lack of vision, the lamp of God—the light of God—though burning low was not out. The scene was ripe for someone, perhaps someone new, to wake up, to hear, and to see.

And that is exactly what happened. Young Samuel was awakened in the night by a voice calling to him. Naturally Samuel assumed it was Eli, and to Eli he ran. Eli, we can imagine, was a bit perturbed at being woken up from his sleep. “I did not call you. Go back to sleep.” Three times Samuel heard a voice and ran to Eli. On the third time, Eli woke up and realized what was afoot.

To Eli’s great credit—despite his old age and his declining vision and despite the lack of guidance he’d given his own sons—Eli became aware that God was speaking. He became for Samuel a spiritual guide, that person in Samuel’s life who could suggest with some authority, “Hey, maybe this thing you’re experiencing—this nudge, this sound—maybe it is God.”

Everyone needs an Eli in their life. This is not just a story of how the light went out in Eli and found its way into Samuel. It’s a story of how Eli fanned the flame in Samuel, how Eli did not just fade from the scene or bow out from the story but took an active role of encourager. Notice that Eli did not suggest to Samuel what God might have to say. He did not launch into a long story about his own encounters with God. Instead Eli entrusted Samuel to God’s voice. He told him to go back to bed and listen.

If it crossed Eli’s mind that he was being replaced, it did not show. Instead Eli fostered the blossoming conversation between Samuel and God and by doing so, Eli gave Samuel a great gift. He did not deem Samuel too young to hear from God. He did not discount Samuel in favor of his own sons. Instead he believed in Samuel, believed in God, trusted that the two of them had work to do and he mustn’t stand in the way or obstruct the future from unfolding.

This attitude gave Samuel the courage to return to the place where he first heard God’s voice and keep listening. And this time something different happened. For the first time, our narrator tells us that “the Lord came and stood there, calling out as before.” No one had mentioned it before, that God physically stood there. And so perhaps it was the case that finally Samuel not only heard. He also saw. Though the word of God was rare in those days and vision scarce, Samuel experienced both. Though Eli’s own eyesight was poor, he had the wherewithal to help Samuel return to his room and see what may have been there all along.

I have already mentioned that Eli’s sons were corrupt and that God was not pleased with Eli’s lack of leadership concerning the corruption. When Samuel finally figured out it was God

speaking to him, and when he sat up to listen, what God had to say to him was not good news for Eli: Time was up for his wicked sons.

As you can imagine, when morning came, Samuel was afraid and in no hurry to relay this message to Eli, which was young Samuel's first lesson that the job of a prophet isn't fun. Samuel certainly took no pleasure delivering this message to Eli, his mentor, his advisor, his colleague. To Eli's credit, he encouraged Samuel to tell the full truth, thus beckoning Samuel forth into his prophetic role. Eli did not rebuke Samuel when the truth stung; he merely listened. Eli was a leader who could accept truthful criticism without retaliation, and for all his flaws, these receptive interactions with young Samuel were quite admirable.

1 Samuel 3:20 reports that in time, "All Israel came to know that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord." Maybe that is because Samuel spoke truth to power, regardless of how difficult the truth was to tell. *Or* maybe Samuel was trustworthy because first he *listened*, regardless of how difficult the truth was to hear.

In a world of hasty reactions, in a time where our frustrations are high and our fuses are short, what would it be like to sit through the long night listening for God? What would it be like to live like a prophet—that is, to speak only after you have received the inspiration to do so? The power of a prophet is not their biting critique of the status quo. The power of the prophet is their capacity to hear God. When God's word is scarce and vision infrequent, the prophet is the one who hears and sees.

It takes awhile to really hear, so if you're in a big hurry, it's not going to happen. It takes awhile to really hear, so if you make snap judgments, it's not going to happen. It takes awhile to really hear, so in order to do it, you must step outside the frantic pace of the world about you. You must slow down, breathe, wake up your ears, and wait. Life will pull at you, screaming, "React! React! React!" God will be more patient with you, gently calling your name until you listen.

I think about how Samuel listened to God, Eli listened to Samuel, God listened to Hannah. When the world is falling apart around you, when the leadership is corrupt and there are a million things to do about it, you might think, "Who's got time to listen?" But perhaps listening has never been so crucial. Perhaps listening is the first step to changing the world. Perhaps God is calling you, calling you to listen.

Of course, the tricky thing about listening to God is God doesn't seem to speak to all of us in the same ways. Some people seem to hear from God often and clearly. Others aren't sure if they've ever really heard God. Some of us have been convinced we heard from God, only to find out later that perhaps we were wrong. Some of us have been abused by people who claim to hear from God but speak lies. Some hear from God audibly, others get a sort of quiet nudge, others get a feeling. Some of us are certain we've heard from God, while others of us feel it's all a guessing game or even perhaps a bit of make-believe.

When in doubt, begin here: sit still and listen to someone who is oppressed. This is where God begins, so it's a good place to start. Listen to a mother who is being deported and separated from her children. Listen to a poor man working a minimum wage job. Listen to a survivor of sexual

violence. Listen to a refugee grieving the loss of a homeland. Listen to one of the rejects, knocking at the door to be let back in. Listen to the Hannahs of this world, praying in desperation. If you don't know how to listen *to* God, listen *like* God, and see what happens. Listen like God listens, listen to the cries of the oppressed, and see what you hear.

For though the word of God seems scarce and vision infrequent, I trust that among the least of these, the lamp of God burns on, always burns on. Amen.