

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

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The Voice of Mystery

1 Samuel 3:1-10

I got serious about the ministry sometime during the late sixties. It was sometime after the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, and after the Tet Offensive in Viet Nam. Perhaps you were disturbed as I was about the problems we faced at that time. I enjoyed my work in the Air Force, but I sensed a need for a change. I began to think that I wanted to do something to change things, to help people. I wondered what God might want me to do with my life.

I began to read the Bible daily. Some might say I became obsessed with it. Reading the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, fired me with enthusiasm I had never known. I'd been raised in the church; thus I approached the scriptures from a Christian perspective. I'd read much of the Bible before; but when I opened it after several years of letting it gather dust, I simply couldn't put it down. No I didn't hear a voice in the night, as Samuel did. But I was so caught up in the story that I would rush home from work to pick up where I left off the day before.

For me Moses' excuses, Isaiah's "Here I am! Send me," Jeremiah's rants, and Peter's confession, all jumbled together to express what I felt: "No! Yes! But! I believe! Help my unbelief!" Though certainly not exclusive of the New Testament, my call to the Christian ministry came largely through study of the Old Testament. It was as if, like Samuel, I had awakened to a voice that I did not know, calling my name with urgency. With Samuel, I eventually answered, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

I am not one who thinks ministers are somehow different from other Christians. When I answered that inner voice, I wasn't speaking as a minister. I was answering as a curious person of uncertain faith. I believe that each one of us at some point must consider what God is calling us to do. Teachers, Doctors, Lawyers, Pilots, Clerks, Entrepreneurs, Politicians, Police and Firefighters — you name it — God's call is not limited to ministry. That US Airways pilot who ditched his plane in the Hudson River was doing what God called him to do, safeguarding the lives of his passengers. Every one of us can serve God in our particular vocations. Thus each one of us at some point must turn to that voice of mystery and answer, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

Ah, but how can we be sure the voice we're answering is God's voice and not just some inner urging? To that question I would answer first, how do you know that your inner urging is not God's voice? Nowadays it seems to me that we avoid spiritual explanations. We default to a hundred other explanations. Perhaps that is because we're not accustomed to thinking that God might be speaking to us. That should come as no surprise. It took Eli half the night to figure out that God was interrupting Samuel's sleep. Finally after several visits from the boy... finally Eli the Priest, the one who you'd think would look for God's Spirit at work... finally Eli awoke to the fact that God was speaking to Samuel. So he told Samuel to listen up and answer.

What role do the Scriptures play in all this? Why are we so committed to reading the Bible? It is the Scriptures that confirm if the voice we're hearing is God's voice or some other. God will not

call us to a life contrary to the teachings of the Bible. So if we think we are called to live in contradiction to what Scripture leads us to believe and do, then that call is not from God. But if we find ourselves urged or called to make changes in our lives in accord with the Scriptures, then it is likely that it is God's voice we're hearing.

Remember, I found myself fired up by my reading of the Bible. I believe the Bible is the Word of God written. Thus when I read it personally, I am listening for God's word to me. When I read it collectively in church, I am and I hope we are together, listening for God's word to us. I believe that the Scriptures were inspired by the Holy Spirit working in the lives of faithful people. They collected, compiled and/or edited earlier stories or writings. Or they composed their own in the firm conviction that God was speaking to them and through them to the larger community of the faithful. Hear that? They believed, and I invite you to believe, that through their writings God is speaking to us.

I reject the literal interpretation of Scripture that so many hold today. I think it is nonsense to believe that God dictated the words to someone who wrote them down letter by letter. I believe strongly that God created the heavens and the earth. But I don't believe it happened exactly as the first chapter of Genesis says it did. It's not the particular words that matter. It's the meaning conveyed by the words and stories. The Holy Spirit empowers you and me to hear the same essential Word the writers sought to communicate to their people through the words they wrote. But God's word is in the meaning, not in the words themselves.

John Calvin wrote, "those who have not yet been illumined by the Spirit of God are rendered teachable by reverence for the church."¹ That illustrates the mutuality between the scriptures and the faithful community. It was Samuel's relationship with Eli that caused him to listen when Eli told him what to do. Eli taught Samuel to recognize that the voice he heard was God's voice. When Samuel first heard God's voice speaking to him he had no idea who was speaking to him. He thought it was Eli the priest. "Samuel did not yet know the Lord," the story says, "And the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him."² When he heard the voice he never imagined that it might be God speaking.

Eli prepared Samuel to welcome the unimaginable. The fact that Eli recognized the voice as authoritative influenced Samuel to listen. Presumably the voice was equally authoritative every time Samuel heard it. The difference in Samuel before hearing with understanding and afterward was not an issue of authority, but of preparation. Samuel was rendered teachable by his relationship with Eli. Thus prepared, Samuel listened in a new way to words that conveyed authority.

You and I likewise are rendered teachable by our relationship to the church and with each other. Think of your own faith story. Can you remember a time when, as the Scripture says about Samuel, you did not yet know the Lord? Remember too a time when you began to listen earnestly. What changed? Who played the role of Eli to you? Your mother, father, a pastor or friend, perhaps a teacher? Someone along the line told you to listen to that voice, that urging, God might be speaking to you in it. Or you turned to someone to help clarify your understanding of God's word to you and that person helped you with your decision making.

Then again, it's possible that you are still listening for that voice, that you aren't sure you ever heard God speaking to you. Don't let that bother you. That does not mean God is not with you.

¹John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.3, 77.

²1 Samuel 3:7, RSV

Notice that God obviously had been with Samuel from before he was born. It's just that God chose to wait for the right moment to speak to Samuel. I too was raised in the church, but it wasn't until later that I listened to that voice. Many of you have told me similar accounts. What I think is important for us to remember is that it is the Lord who chooses when to speak to us. And when the Lord speaks, we don't always know that it is the Lord. That much is made clear in this passage. And that's why we need each other, the Scriptures and the church.

Frederick Buechner, a contemporary Presbyterian writer invites us all, "Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."³ With him, I say listen for that voice of mystery, read the Bible, pray and worship in expectation that God may again be speaking to you, if not today, then tomorrow. And when you hear that voice, or sense that movement of Spirit within you, join with Samuel in this simple prayer, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

³Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1983), 87.