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**Title:** Listening?

**Date:** June 3, 2018

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**Scripture:** [2 Corinthians 4:5-12](#)

**Text:** [1 Samuel 3:1-10](#)

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Theatrical producer and director, Jed Harris was responsible for some of the most successful productions on Broadway in the 1920s and 30s. He entered Yale when he was 17 but dropped out a year later telling a professor, "I'm neither rich enough nor dull-witted enough to endure this awful place." My apologies if there are any Yale grads here this morning.

One year, in the middle of a lengthy season filled with intense pressure from managing multiple shows and the need to care for many details, Harris began to lose his sense of hearing. He could not even hear what other people close to him were saying and he was missing crucial details during conversations.

As a result, Jed Harris decided to pay a visit to a renowned audiologist who listened attentively as the producer gave the sad account of his declining ability to hear. After a thorough examination of Harris' ears, the hearing specialist pulled an expensive, gold pocket watch out of his vest pocket and placed it against the producer's ear. "Do you hear this watch ticking?" the audiologist asked.

"Absolutely," the producer responded. The audiologist moved further away. "How about now?" Harris focused and remarked, "Yes, it is still quite audible." The physician then walked into the next room and asked, "How about now?"

They let silence rest over the room and then, "Yes, I can still hear it. How can that be?" Harris replied. The specialist came back into the office and returned the watch to his vest. "This phenomenon is quite commonplace," he said, "especially among successful individuals. Your hearing is excellent Mr. Harris. You've simply quit listening." <sup>1</sup>

Do you know anyone like that? They don't have a hearing problem, but they most certainly do have a listening problem. Obviously some people do have hearing problems, but many times people miss messages simply because they do not listen to one another. Hearing and listening are two different issues. Ask anyone in a relationship and you likely will get a story about hearing and listening.

Last week, Kyle gave us insight into the call of Isaiah and we sang "Here I Am, Lord" because that was Isaiah's response to God's call and Kyle even told of his call to ministry. In both Isaiah and Kyle, there was hearing and listening. This week, we are presented with another, albeit very different call story, the call of Samuel. Ultimately, Samuel's call happens differently and Samuel's response is different. Having these two stories back to back can inform us in how we hear and respond to God's call for us.

Let's do a little recap as to how Samuel got to where we pick up the story with this morning's reading. You may recall that Samuel was in the temple because of a promise that his mother, Hannah, had made. Hannah was one of two wives of a man named Elkanah. The other wife named Peninnah was prolific at having babies. But Hannah could not seem to get pregnant no matter what. Peninnah taunted Hannah unmercifully about this. Hannah would weep and pray passionately that God would give her a child. Her

husband Elkanah would try to reassure her. He would say, “Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?” His reassurances, however, did nothing to console her.

One day Hannah was at the temple of Shiloh. She was on her knees, praying fervently for a child. It was then she made a promise to God, “Lord, if you give me a son, I will give him back to you.” She was moving her lips without making any sound as she prayed.

Eli, a priest in the temple, who was watching her pray so passionately, moving her lips but making no sound, thought that she must be drunk. He said to her, “How long are you going to make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.” (Let me just say here that Eli must have decided to skip the class on pastoral care when they talked about appropriate and compassionate caregiving to those in distress).

Hannah replied, “Not so, my lord, I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or strong drink; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.”

Eli answered, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.” She said, “May your servant find favor in your eyes.” And the Lord did give Hannah the desire of her heart. They named him Samuel, which means “I begged from the Lord.” When he was a small boy, Hannah placed Samuel under the care of the elderly priest Eli in the temple of Shiloh to fulfill the promise she had made to the Lord.

That’s where we pick up today’s reading – 1 Samuel 3:1-10

Samuel, about 11 or 12 years of age, is lying on his bed in the house of the Lord late at night, when he hears a voice and he assumes it is Eli. You can imagine that Eli, being almost blind, would call on Samuel quite often to get things for him and assist him as he grew older and weaker. So Samuel ran to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” The third time this happens, it dawns on Eli that the boy is actually hearing from God and gives him the words to say if it happens again, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And, it does happen again and Samuel answers as Eli has instructed.

This is an important story of our faith. Samuel would later become a Judge of Israel and one of its most important prophets. In fact, he was the last of Israel’s Judges and the first of its prophets. It was Samuel who anointed both King Saul and King David to be kings. He had an important role to play, a role he played thanks to a mother’s promise, an encouraging mentor in the person of Eli and his own openness to the voice of God.

I believe we would all like to be able to listen to God. To know when God is speaking or to be able to distinguish God’s voice from all others. At its very core, it’s likely why you’ve come here this morning, hoping to hear a whisper of God’s voice, to discern what God’s word is for you on this particular day.

It’s difficult to listen to God in these times simply because there is too much noise. There are lots of sounds that impair our hearing and distract us from listening. There is avoidance. We can’t hear what we don’t see. By ignoring a problem or denying one that exists we simply look in another direction.

Another noise that inhibits our ability to hear is temptation. All those things that we do to make us “feel” better. Those things that sap our time, energy and resources. These are distractions which keep us from doing what we really want to do. The temptation to do it all is too great.

There are also sounds of guilt, resentment, failure and shame. We are unable to hear the voice of God when we have blocked forgiveness from setting us free.

But, the one noise that seems to ring the loudest and drowns out the voice we should hear is fear. When the noise is like the sound of a train passing by or a thunderstorm on a stormy, summer night, we cover our ears to keep the sound from drowning us. Fear grips us to the point that we can’t move or think. Ironically, the message that Samuel hears is one that says the house of Eli will fall and give way to the rise of new leadership. It was a harsh message but it was also the truth. The voice of God calls us away from fear and invites us to respond in faith.

So, how does God speak to us? Of course, people discover the message of God in various ways. Few people today experience theophanies like we hear about in the Hebrew Bible. People today do not wrestle with God, as did Jacob, nor do they encounter God in a burning bush that is not consumed, as did Moses. None of us has ever seen a person taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot, as was Elijah. Even though God does not speak to us in these overt ways, certainly God is calling.

God calls us in the events of our lives. Things happen in life, unexpected things, events that bring joy and triumph and those that bring sadness and defeat. The message is not always obvious; we are often confused by what God may be saying. Since the picture is not completely clear, we need to listen as well as observe and seek the counsel of others to help us discern what a particular message might be.

Just this week, I’ve had two conversations about how people hear the voice of God. One from someone in this congregation who has had a nagging sense for over three years now that they should be going deeper in their response to God’s call. My advice to anyone who believes they are being called into full-time Christian ministry as a vocation is always the same – “If you can do absolutely anything else, do it – if you cannot you are likely being called into ministry.

That was true for me. I wanted to be an architect. I spent three years in architecture school. I loved architecture – BUT... there was this nagging sense that my direction wasn’t right. When I sought counsel from a mentor, he gave me the same advice that I now give to others, could I do anything else. I determined the answer was “no” and I sought to change direction. When that decision was made, a sense of peace washed over me that is difficult to describe.

The other conversation, really multiple conversations, this week were about Jesse Duplantis. Did you hear about this Louisiana evangelist asking people to partner with him so he could respond to God telling him this week that he needed a new \$54 million private jet – a Dassault Falcon 7X to be exact? <sup>2</sup> Perhaps this, more than any other example I can give, points to the need for someone like Eli in our life who can help understand what we think we hear from God. A rule of thumb would be that if what you hear from God is more of a benefit to you than to others, it’s probably not a valid interpretation.

I know, even if you understand that God is calling you to do something for the glory of God, you have reasons – excuses really – that it can’t happen. I’m too old. You know about Anton Bruckner, the composer of nine symphonies? He was a butcher until he stepped out in faith to write music.

You've been told you're not smart enough or don't have the gifts for what you're thinking about to serve God. You know about Albert Einstein, right. Growing up, many people thought him to be ignorant and rebellious and his theories were rejected by some of the smartest minds of the time.

How about Saint Augustine, you've heard that name. He wandered for thirty years trying to find himself and was involved in a relationship that bore a son. He became a bishop and a great scholar.

The lives of these three and so many others present a good illustration of how it is necessary to respond to God. A sense of openness allows one to hear the call in a spirit of courage and conviction and sends the individual forward to do whatever it is that God asks of the person. The bottom line for today is to be open to God's call in order to do whatever it is that God asks of us.

God spoke to Samuel something that I am sure was not expected or wanted. God's message was harsh; punishment would come to the house of Eli. Eli's sons had done evil in the sight of the Lord and the old man had done nothing to stop them. Even with such a harsh message, Eli is still able to proclaim to the young Samuel, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him" In other words, Eli accepts what the Lord has brought his way. Even in difficult circumstances he is able to respond in a positive way to the Lord.

As God called Anton Bruckner, Albert Einstein, and Saint Augustine to do great things, and as the Lord called Samuel to listen to his word, so God calls all of us. The question, of course, is how do we know what God wants us to do? How do we know that it is the call of God and not the call of someone or something else? The only way we can know is to be open to the invitation of God.

Remember back to the 2 Corinthians passage that was read earlier in the service. We have a treasure in clay jars. The extraordinary power comes not from us but from God. We carry the life of Jesus Christ so that he may be made visible in our bodies it says. The good news is not just that Jesus died and rose. It's that Jesus presents himself to us again and again in his church. The church is the Word made new in each and every person here. And as a member of the body of Christ, you get the staggering privilege of sharing his message with the gifts that God gave you.

Some of you may know that I serve on a non-profit board for an organization called Silent Blessings. It's an organization whose mission it is to carry the good news of Jesus Christ to deaf and hard of hearing children and youth. The primary way we do that is through a television program called Dr. Wonder's Workshop in which these fun characters, all deaf actors themselves, share Jesus through fun situations and songs. I am always amazed when I have met those actors or other deaf members of the intensity in which they listen – either in lip reading or watching as others use sign language.

There are many voices competing for our attention and how many of us can say that we really know God well enough to recognize a word as being from God or someone else? There is one thing we can know, however. The overwhelming witness of the prophets is that God has no tolerance for those who pretend we don't hear God or don't listen intently enough or don't respond to God. That we are to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world is clear.

Perhaps the biggest difficulty of this message is how easily it can apply to us. How many of us are ready to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" and really mean it. It's probably not a call to full-time ministry although it may be. More likely it is something that is tugging on you to make a difference for good – to show Christ to others in the way that you can but haven't yet.

As you respond to God's call this week, may you so stand in the stream of God's consciousness. May the waters of God's love and the waves of God's will carry you in the directions the Spirit would have you go - toward the people God would bring into your path. Count it as great opportunity.

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<sup>1</sup> Information on Jed Harris found on his Wikipedia page.

<sup>2</sup> Report of Jesse Duplantis found on the [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com) site. Article dated 5/30/2018 by Carol Kuruvilla.