

Hearing Voices
I Samuel 3:1-20
John 1:43-51

“Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

In the church, this is the second Sunday after Epiphany, a season when we celebrate the manifestation, the appearance of God to the Gentiles in God’s Word become flesh. Yet the question left lingering in the winter air a few millennia later is: How do merely human beings hear God’s Word? With the multitude of other voices coming at us day and night, on what basis do we trust one voice to be God’s and not another?

Before Christ’s birth, God’s people pretty much had to do with God made manifest in God’s address, God’s word. In the beginning, God spoke the world into being, spoke to Adam and Eve, to Noah, to Abraham and Sarah, to Isaac and Jacob. God spoke to Moses and was made manifest to God’s people in the law. Hundreds of years later, because God’s people were listening to other voices, God spoke through the prophets to call them back to God. Shorthand for the manifestation of God’s word before the incarnation was “the law and the prophets.” Then in the fullness of time, God spoke to us by a son. “The presupposition of the Bible,” Karl Barth wrote, “is not that God is but that [God] spoke. We are directed, not to God in himself, but to God communicating himself. . .one speaks and another is spoken to.”

The story before us today in I Samuel is an incredible story about God speaking and another being spoken to when the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread. This was the period of the judges, before Israel asked for a king. Under the judges, we read over and over again that “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” Put another way, they listened to a multitude of voices that divided the people and left them vulnerable to random spiritual winds and hostile foreign oppressors.

In his Op Ed this week, Russ Douthat identifies three approaches to hearing God’s voice in our present American religious culture: traditional, spiritual and secular. In relation to I Samuel, the first two approaches peaked my interest. In particular I Samuel’s observation that “all the people did what was right in their own eyes,” mirrors what Douthat says is “the most American approach to matters of faith: a religious individualism that blurs the line between the God out there and the God Within, a gnostic spirituality that constantly promises access to a secret and personalized wisdom. . . a do-it-yourself form of faith that encourages syncretism and relativism in the pursuit of ‘your truth.’”

God knows there are a multitude of voices in our culture vying for our souls, our children’s souls and our society’s soul: voices that are promising right now to save us from whatever our greatest fears are. Maybe it is not having enough money or enough inner peace or enough social capital or enough self-esteem. These voices claim to have the secret path to what we most long to have and are often voices adept at using the residue of Judeo-Christian “values” as the next iteration of God’s speech. From a traditionalist’s perspective, one clue that these voices are not God’s voice is their tendency to focus us on ourselves rather than sending us to the other. But I am getting ahead of myself.

I repeat: if in the season of Epiphany the recurring question has to do with how merely human beings hear God’s Word, then on what basis do we trust one voice to be God’s and not another?

Enter Samuel. Samuel was the last of the judges and his birth to a barren woman named Hannah was a sign that God was about to do a new thing. When Samuel is weaned, Hannah brings him to the temple and gives him to Eli, that he might serve God under Eli’s tutelage. Unfortunately, Eli is so old that his two sons are running the show. I Samuel reports that they are scoundrels because they ate the burned fat of the sacrifices which belonged to the Lord and they lay with women who served the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting. Eli knew all of this but did nothing about it. Just before our reading begins, a man of God comes to Eli and tells him God is going to destroy his household and raise up a faithful priest who will do God’s will.

That priest is Samuel, who hears a voice calling his name while he is sleeping in the temple before the Ark of the Covenant. Assuming it is the voice of Eli, his mentor, three times he runs to Eli and three times Eli says he has not called him. Now if you are prone to put your trust in older authority figures, it is easy to mistake the voice of human authority over you for the voice of God presently calling your name. I think of Martin Luther who mistook the voice of his stern and judgmental father for the voice of God until God’s word of grace literally broke through Brother Martin’s terror of God as he read Romans 1: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” In the case of Eli and Samuel, it was necessary for Eli to direct Samuel away from his voice so that he could hear God’s voice, even though Eli knew God would speak a word of judgment against him to the young boy.

Here Douthat’s preferred approach to hearing and discerning God’s voice comes into play. The traditional approach takes various forms,” he writes, “(Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Orthodox Jewish—[why only Orthodox?]) but its

instincts are creedal, confessional, dogmatic; it believes in a specific revelation, a specific authority and a specific holy book, and seeks to conform itself to teachings handed down from the religious past.” Douthat is a conservative Catholic who does not much like Pope Francis. Hence his take on the traditional approach ties God’s voice to a kind of originalist interpretation of God’s speech in Scripture and doctrine.

Had Eli believed that the law as interpreted by his corrupt household was the sum and substance of God’s speaking to Israel, perhaps he would simply have told Samuel to stop bothering him. Had Brother Martin believed the authority and judgment of the corrupt 16th century curia alone had heard God’s voice rightly, he never would have listened for God’s word as he read the holy book. Still, on what authority does anyone claim to hear God’s voice countering the interpretation of God’s voice handed down by religious authorities in the past?

Sometimes hearing requires a past authority to relinquish control of the next generation’s hearing, as Eli did when he said, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” Other times, it is the next generation paying fresh attention to the text and the Spirit, listening for the new thing God is about to do. Yet there is a caveat and a caution if traditionalists are to hear God’s voice from within a community bound by a specific revelation and text. The caveat for the Elis among us is that the God who freed Israel from Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead is still speaking. The Spirit is active and alive and working overtime between the words of Scripture and the headlines in human history. Faithful hearing is not simply parroting the words of the church fathers or quoting ad nauseam dead white male theologians. But there is also a caution for the Samuels in the crowd. The Spirit and the voice that is *this* God’s is a voice that coincides with the specific revelation of the God who spoke in the beginning, the God who has come to us, in the fullness of time, in Jesus Christ, and the God who, through the Spirit, has been reliably heard by a multitude of hearers before us.

Listening for God’s Word, as Ministers of Word and Sacrament are set apart to do, is a huge and humbling and time-consuming responsibility, one that is often lost in the multitude of things a minister must do in order to keep the ship of faith afloat. It is also a daunting responsibility because, as Samuel discovered when he listened to the voice that night in the temple, often you hear a word that you are afraid to repeat because it is a word clean contrary to the other voices God’s people have been listening to.

All of which brings me to the last word about hearing voices: there comes a time when, even though you are afraid, what you have heard from the Lord compels you to speak a word of judgment against God’s house. That was the case in 1963 when Brother Martin’s namesake wrote from his cell in Birmingham jail to eight prominent “liberal” Alabama clergymen who had released a statement calling the present activities of the civil rights movement “unwise and untimely.” King began by reminding them that the meaning of Christian discipleship was at the heart of the African American struggle for freedom, justice and equality. Then, toward the end of a very long letter, he wrote:

I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership...I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. Over and over again I have found myself asking: ‘What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?’ Where were their voices when...Governor Wallace gave the clarion call for defiance and hatred? ...The contemporary church...is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silence and often vocal sanction of things as they are.

To be silent this morning would be unfaithful to the God whose voice we continue to hear in Jesus Christ. The President’s words about racial and ethnic equality on Friday rang hollow as he signed a proclamation honoring Dr. King, not only because of his reported words the day before saying we should accept more immigrants from places like Norway instead of from Haiti or countries in Africa, but also because his words over the last year and before that have fanned rather than doused the fires that divide white, black and brown. Terrific that unemployment among African-Americans is at an all-time low. That fact does not in any way justify or excuse the racist statements that more and more mean to shape this nation’s policy toward people of color. Neither are white liberals excused, for as King also said in his letter, “Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.”

Then the Lord said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle...I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.” May it be so for this house of worship as well if the voice of Christ’s church is not heard to speak a word against the voices intent on making American white again. Amen.