

“Does God Still Speak?”

1 Samuel 3: 1-10

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Listen – a voice is calling.

Samuel! Samuel! Do you hear it?

It was night in the temple. It was dark across the land. God’s Word was rare. Old men were not seeing visions. The young were not dreaming dreams. No one was prophesying. The word of God was rare indeed.

It was a voice calling out to Samuel, a young boy, a helper who lived in the temple with the priest Eli. The boy could not distinguish who was calling him and thought it was Eli. Eli said he had not called and told him to go back to sleep. The boy lay back down, but the voice was persistent. “Samuel! Samuel!” It pierced the gloom of night and the darkness of Israel. Again, Samuel rushes to Eli, and the priest says he didn’t call. At this point, you wonder, why didn’t they know who was calling. But the text wants us to be patient.

God’s Word was rare. Vision had dried up. The Hebrew people had been delivered from slavery. They had been led by God through the wilderness to a land of plenty, a promised land. It seems that they had forgotten the Lord. They had turned away from the One who had given them a land of milk and honey. They were in conflict with their neighbors and even fighting among themselves.

Before this there had been people who heard God’s Word. There was Deborah the Judge, Gideon the prophet, and Samson the Nazirite. They had heard God. They listened to the Lord and followed God’s call. But other than these faithful few, no one was listening, no one was dreaming, no one was daring to envision.

And it was rare even in the place you would expect to hear God’s Word—the temple. The text tells us that Eli’s vision was growing dim physically, but, symbolically, this man of God also had no religious vision either. He had reduced himself to a religious functionary. In the first chapter he is policing the sanctuary, regulating worship, critical of the prayer of Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Eli doesn’t have to deal with God; he manages the institution just fine. And his two son’s, priests-in-training, Hophni and Phinehas, are worse. They use their religious position for their own gain. They are greedy men. When people bring their sacrifices to the temple, they don’t wait for the priest’s portion; instead, they take the choice piece first. They see women who serve at the temple’s gates as prey for their sexual appetite. And God is the farthest thing from their minds. They have turned the temple, the house of the Lord, into a holy place for unholy ambitions. Even in the temple God is not heard. No one is listening; no one is dreaming. No one has a vision.

Some might say that the word of the Lord is rare today. The economic difficulties we may face today do not result only from the bad decisions of a few people. It is an old story of human beings. It is called idolatry, worshipping something less than God. We have worshipped at the shrine of wealth and the market. Someone said, “We have replaced God with the ‘invisible hand’ of the market, substituted ‘market value’ for ‘moral values’ and attributed all that was good and right to the power of the market to make it so.” (1) All of us, rich and poor, have been moved into making heroes out of those who seemed to have turned everything they touched into gold. We made a holy trinity out of low interest rates, deregulated markets, and the ability of so-called financial innovation to insulate markets and the millions of people who depend on them from calamities. I fear that it doesn’t always work, and as a citizen of our nation who happens to be a Christian, I wonder, “Is there a word from the Lord on these matters?” How do our values impact our economy?

I look at churches who are worried about their survival, when the world around us is hungry for equity and justice and demands in their longing to hear the word of God, the troubling word of God, that dislocates us from our comfort zones to speak words of courage and hope again to the world that God loves. Does anyone anymore have the courage to dream God's dream and to speak words of hope? The word of the Lord is rare indeed.

"Samuel, Samuel!" a voice cries the third time, a voice that will not give up on his people, a voice that is petulant and persistent, and Eli, the jaded cynic, manager of religion, even he, begins to understand that God is speaking to this 12-year-old boy, a boy dedicated to God from before his birth. Eli directs Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" Samuel obeys, and when the voice calls the fourth time, Samuel utters the courageous words of a willing servant, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

And the word that comes to Samuel is a troubling word, an uncomfortable word, that God will judge Eli and his sons. We don't really want to hear those words either. The writer Annie Dillard has said that when we come to church, we should be wearing crash helmets. God's Word should shatter our illusions and expectations, rob us of our niceness, and transform and convert us into a people courageous for God. And sometimes it takes a troubling word from the Lord to challenge and change us, to break our stone-cold hearts into hearts yearning for God's love and justice to be poured out upon us and others.

We need to hear a word from the Lord. Greed and money are not the greatest values of this world. We need to break those idols. We need to hear a word that speaks emphatically against war and the amassing of the resources of our nation to support so much of it. Does the Gospel call us to a deeper commitment to our spouses and loved ones, rather than the cursive attention that we often give them? Is there a word from the Lord about how we overcome our political polarization and tribalism, a word that calls us to listen to one another as fellow citizens of our great nation? Troubling words remind us that we cannot live the way we have always lived. Troubling words call us to repentance and to action. Troubling words point us to a greater vision of life lived new and whole.

Can you hear the voice calling? One of our great American prophets was Martin Luther King, Jr., who proclaimed God's Word boldly. He dreamed God's dream, dared to advance God's vision of a just and good society. Those were troubling words that he spoke. I remember so vividly as a child the reaction of my white neighbors to those troubling words. But his words were the Word of God, spoken to a man who said, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

If you go to Atlanta and visit the Martin Luther King Center, you will find in the middle of the center a ramp painted to look like a road. On that road there are statues of people of all races and ages. There is an old man, walking with a cane and a young man standing proud. There are little boys and girls running alongside the road. And they are all inviting you to join them in the march. When you get to the top of the ramp, you look out upon Atlanta and the world, the world that is filled with suffering and the world God loves. At the top of that ramp, you realize that not only have you joined the march but that you are at the head of the line, leading the way, accepting responsibility and the challenge to be God's person in the world, to be a person who listens to God's troubling words and who acts. (2) Listen, for God is still speaking, and God is calling your name.

- 1) Jim Wallis, Rediscovering Values on Wall Street, Main Street, and Your Street: A Moral Compass for the New Economy, New York: Howard Books, 2010, p. 28.
- 2) Told in Robert Brewer's sermon, "Dared to Listen", Preaching: Word and Witness, Vol. 6:1, p.36.