

Manningham Uniting Church Fellowship@10

Holy Communion

02. 06. 2024: Second Sunday after Pentecost

Theme: Listening to God's Call

Text: 1 Samuel 3:1-10 and Mark 2:23-3:6.

Introduction

'In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.'

(1 Samuel 3, 1b) These words begin the story of the calling of Samuel.

Are you a good listener? **Do you know there is a big difference between hearing and listening?**

Hearing means that the sound waves go into your ear, make the eardrum vibrate, nerves in the snail-shaped structure are stimulated and the signal goes to your brain.

Listening is much more. It could be described as actively hearing. A person can be standing two feet away; if you're not paying attention, what they say is just a mumble.

When you listen, you tune in. You hang on to every word.

I'm reminded of the old prayer: "Grant that we may in such wise hear [the Scriptures], read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them." That means we listen, take the words to heart, apply them, and live them daily.

At one level today's Old Testament Lesson is all about hearing, listening, and acting.

Samuel hears his name and runs to Eli, "Here I am, you called me." And finally, he says, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."

In the story we are told, God speaks and calls Samuel four times, "Samuel! Samuel!" (vv.4, 6, 8, 10), but three of those times, Samuel thinks the elder priest, Eli, is calling him. It is not until the fourth time after Eli tells Samuel that it is God, that Samuel responds to the call with "Speak, for your servant is listening" (v.10). At first, Samuel does not know God's voice, but he soon realises that God is the foundation of his future prophetic work.

The question is God speaks but do we listen? NOW some of you might be thinking, "I am not comfortable with this whole idea about God speaking". Or "I don't believe in the idea that God speaks anymore".

I am sure that most of you are unaware that in 2004, 20 years ago the United Church of Christ (UCC) in the US produced commercials with the tagline **“God is still speaking.”**

The controversy that erupted was not so much over the assertion that God still speaks in this day and age, but over what the United Church of Christ was hearing God say: That Jesus didn't turn people away, and neither would the United Church of Christ. No human label — straight, gay, white, black, Hispanic, disabled or anything else — would be a barrier to membership in a United Church of Christ

That was a message that many television networks deemed 'too controversial' for the United Church of Christ to communicate to the masses. Many were telling them they had misunderstood that still-speaking God, for the networks and many other religious folks were convinced that God would never say something like that because that's what the Bible says, homosexuality is a sin, that God hates faggots.

However, the UCC is convinced that its vision of God's realm is the correct one — so convinced, in fact, that in July 2005, the denomination voted to endorse same-gender marriage. The still-speaking God that UCC has heard has told them something new: “I'm blessing even the LGBTQ+ person in your midst.”

The UCC, and other denominations that are coming to understand the importance of including LGBTQ+ people in their churches, are hearing the prophet Isaiah loud and clear: See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:19) Our church did the same thing when we accepted same-sex marriage at the National Assembly in July 2018.

"God is still speaking." Do you believe that? If that's really true, what is God saying today?

We know many places in the Bible describe God as forgetful, ignorant, remote, deaf, and even asleep: “Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.” (cf. Psalm 44:23). In the Old Testament reading this week we are focusing on, God is portrayed as speechless. It's as if God is unable or unwilling to talk: "in those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions" (1 Samuel 3:1).

We generally don't interpret these descriptions of God in a literal way, nor should we. We explain these unflattering depictions of God as 'anthropomorphisms', that is, as measly human attempts to describe God who is ultimately beyond description, and to articulate the experience of many people today of the loneliness of abandonment in a silent world.

Do you remember where you were on Boxing Day, Sunday, 26th December 2004? Do you remember what happened that day nearly 20 years ago? On Sunday morning 26 December 2004 a massive earthquake measuring 9.1- magnitude, struck off the northern tip of Sumatra in Indonesia. It began at 7:59 am local time. In the nine hours following the earthquake, 14 aftershocks with magnitudes between 5.7 and 7.3 occurred. It is believed to be the deadliest tsunami in history, killing more than 230,000 people across 14 countries.

After the Asian tsunami a little Indonesian boy remarked on television, *"We have left our traditional ways, and so God was angry with us. He abandoned us. I think I am alive today to tell our people this."* It's sad but not surprising that this little Indonesian boy thought this way. Truth is Indonesia is no more wicked or deserving of divine punishment than any other country, and in the New Testament Jesus discouraged linking human misfortune with divine punishment (John 9:1–3).

'In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.' (1 Samuel 3, 1b)

The silence of God and the absence of visions Samuel described were not just a subjective feeling, a poetic anthropomorphism, or a human projection onto their image of God. Rather, Samuel accurately described an objective situation. His day was a period of political anarchy in Israel's history when "every person did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6 - 21:25), when the two sons of the priest Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were "wicked men; they had no regard for the Lord" (1 Samuel 2:12).

People were not listening. God was not speaking. God was silent. Visions were rare.

If people were not listening, what's the point of God speaking? X 2

In our Mark Gospel for this morning, we have the Pharisees asking Jesus, *"Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"* (Mark 2:24b)

Jesus's disciples were hungry and going through the grainfields, they began to pick some heads of grain. They did this on Sabbath. The Pharisees were upset. Another time the Pharisees were watching Jesus. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal the man with a shrivelled hand on the Sabbath. The Pharisees thought that to keep the Sabbath holy it meant that they were to do nothing on that day. They applied the commandment legalistically. They heard but they didn't listen.

Jesus said to them, *“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So, the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”*

If you were at the recent Congregational meeting, I shared three short stories. I want to retell one of these stories.

Akashi, a Japanese priest, received a university professor who came to inquire about God. Akashi served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the cup overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. ‘It is overfull. No more will go in!’ ‘Like this cup,’ Akashi said, ‘you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you God unless you first empty your cup?’

If we are so full of ourselves and unable to listen what’s the point of God speaking? X 2

Having left their traditional ways, as the Indonesian boy put it, God was angry with Israel.

It's a chilling thought to imagine or comprehend that God might grant humanity's request for autonomy, that God could honour our insistence that God leave us alone, or that God would stop speaking because of our not listening.

Perhaps God’s last, terrifying word to us might be, *“I have answered your prayers and now grant you the horrible freedom you have craved. Since you are so disinterested as not to listen, I will no longer speak. From now on, the only voices you will hear will be your own.”* But a single person can make a difference. Samuel proved to be the exception in this story. Dedicated to the Lord by his mother Hannah at an early age, he *“continued to grow in stature and in favour with the Lord and with men”* (1 Samuel 2:26).

In contrast to the silence that had fallen upon the land, God spoke to him three times as a little boy (Jewish tradition says he was 12 at the time), and he responded with his famous words, *“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”*

In contrast to the priest Eli and his two degenerate sons who flaunted their sexploitations in the place of worship (1 Samuel 2:22), *“the Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and He let none of his words fall to the ground.”* The nation recognised him as a prophet who heard from and spoke for Yahweh. Samuel eventually crowned Israel's first king, Saul, but not before warning the nation about the oppression inherent in political power (1 Samuel 8). By himself, Samuel ended the drought of divine silence in Israel, for *“Samuel's words came to all Israel”* (1 Samuel 3:19, 21).

The story of Samuel and the silence of God reminds me of a 'saying' from the early desert fathers in Egypt that emphasises this decisive link between divine speech and human attention, between God's call and our response, between word and obedience.

Like so many of the desert 'sayings', this story from Abba Felix begins in one place but ends in another.

"Some brothers who had some seculars with them went to see Abba Felix and they begged him to say a word to them. But the old man kept silence. After they had asked for a long time he said to them, 'You wish to hear a word?' They said, 'Yes, abba.' Then the old man said to them, 'There are no more words nowadays. When the brothers used to consult the old men and when they did what was said to them, God showed them how to speak. But now, since they ask without doing that which they hear, God has withdrawn the grace of the word from the old men and they do not find anything to say, because there are no longer any who carry their words out.' Hearing this, the brothers groaned, saying, 'Pray for us, abba.'"

Perhaps the Indonesian boy spoke more than he knew. If there are "no more words nowadays" from God, if God has "withdrawn the grace of His word," that might have more to do with our human refusal to listen than with any divine reluctance to speak.

I want you to take a few minutes to ponder on these questions:

- When and why have you ever felt the silence of God?
- What are the dangers of claiming that God has spoken to you?
- Is God speaking today? Where and how? What is God saying?