

**MESSAGE: “Here I Am, Lord”**

**Text: I Samuel 3:1-11**

**Purpose: the purpose of this message is to discern God’s voice.**

**On April Fool’s Day of the first year of our marriage, my wife Jude decided to play a prank on my Mother. She called her on the telephone and, pretending to represent the Rockingham County Fish and Game Department, confronted her over a report received that claimed someone in her home was harboring a wild porcupine. “Ma’am,” she insisted, “are you aware that it is illegal to harbor wild creatures that may be a danger to the public?”**

**“There are no porcupines housed at this location!” my Mom protested, but the lady from Fish and Game would have none of it.**

**“I just need you to know, Ma’am, that if we send an agent to your home and discover that you are in fact harboring a porcupine, the fine is steep and you may have to do jail-time.”**

**My Mother swallowed the ruse, hook, line and sinker. In fact, she became so distressed that my wife almost chickened out of confessing to her who she really was, “April Fool’s, Mom! It’s your daughter-in-law, Jude.”**

**It helps, sometimes, to recognize whose voice is speaking. (pause) But when it comes to hearing God’s voice, that is not always an easy thing to do. Does God speak through verses of the Bible? Impressions in prayer? Pastor’s sermons? Counselor’s advice? Sunday School teacher’s lessons? Does God speak through circumstances? Closed and open doors? Ocean waves and mountaintops? Does God speak through music, liturgy, healing, sacrament or silence? Does God speak in audible ways? How can we be sure it is God’s voice which we hear? How can we be sure God ever speaks at all?**

**Without some kind of communication or connection, it is rather difficult to have anything close to an authentic relationship with God. God’s voice does not always thunder from the top of Mount Sinai. There are times when life crowds out human awareness of God’s presence. In such moments, God may seem far away, removed from our everyday struggle, inaccessible to the questioning heart.**

**I believe this was the case with Samuel and his generation in the text we are working with today. I invite you to read I Samuel 3:1-11 with me. I ask those on my left to be the voice of Samuel, and those on my right to be the voice of Eli. I’ll be the voice of the narrator and supply the voice of God...**

**The first thing I ask you to notice is that even though Samuel and Eli are ministering to the Lord, the text says that ‘The word of the Lord was rare in those days.’ It is possible to**

devote one's whole life to God without ever having a real connection with God. This was certainly true of some of the religious leaders of Jesus' day, and it is the case with some of the religious leaders of our own generation, too. Knowing *about* God is not the same as knowing God, or encountering God in a personal, meaningful way.

Why was 'the word of the Lord rare?' Was it because God was tired of speaking? Was it because God had nothing much to say? Was it because people were hopelessly lost? Or perhaps exceptionally perfect? I suspect it had less to do with a failure of speaking, and more to do with a failure of listening.

Contrast 'the word of the Lord was rare in those days' with these words from a verse of Elizabeth Barret Browning in *Aurora Leigh* (Bk. VII, 1. 820.): "Earth's crammed with heaven. And every common bush afire with God; and only he who sees takes off his shoes—the rest sit round and pluck blackberries." God still speaks to the listening heart. The trouble was, in the days between the judges of Israel, no one was really listening.

In a sense, Samuel was the first PK, preacher's kid. He spent his early life caring for the tabernacle of God, but he did not have a personal relationship with God. In verse 7, we are told, "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." We are not sure who wrote the books of Samuel, but if it was Samuel himself, he is acknowledging that he worked for God for years without really knowing God in any authentic way.

Josephus, a Jewish historian of ancient days, pegs Samuel at age 12 in this story, the same age Jesus was when he interacted with the temple leaders to the distraction of his parents who lost sight of his whereabouts. It is approximately the same age as boys when they celebrate bar mitzvah or girls when they have a coming-of-age ceremony. We might think of it in terms of our Methodist practice of confirmation, an age of accountability when youth can choose to confirm, defer or walk away from the faith in which they were raised. When you hear the saying, "God has no grandchildren," this is what is meant: each of us makes her or his own choice regarding a relationship with God. Mom, Dad, Grampa, Gramma, friend or Pastor Steve can't make the decision for us, each chooses whether or not he or she will walk with God.

In our biblical story, Samuel is tending the lamp of God in the tabernacle where the Ark of Covenant was. In other words, he is positioned in the presence of God. If we wish to hear God's voice, we do well to position ourselves in places where we are in God's presence. That may mean attending a worship service, a praise concert or a spiritual retreat. It may mean going to Camp Mechuwana, joining in a mission project or spending time alone at the edge of a lake. Sometimes we miss God's voice, because we immerse ourselves in noise and distractions, instead of positioning ourselves to listen.

**While Samuel rests, the Lord calls to him, “Samuel! Samuel!”**

**“Here I am!” he replies, startled, perhaps in the way you might if your name is called in class while daydreaming. He runs to Eli’s room, assuming his mentor has called. But Eli has not called, and Samuel returns.**

**Three times this happens. Samuel hears God’s voice, audibly, but does not recognize who speaks. I wonder how often that may be true for me. Have there been times when God has spoken, yet I have remained oblivious? Are there spiritual tools which might help me listen more attentively? Are there tools which might help me distinguish the voice of God from the voice of Steve ruminating about this or that? There certainly are, and they are called things like: praise, Bible study, prayer, service, spiritual direction, retreat, and friendship accountability.**

**Samuel is blessed to have a mentor who suggests that God may be the one speaking. Eli counsels him to respond to the voice of God by saying, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Those who have encountered God have a responsibility to help others encounter God. This is the ‘witness’ part of our membership vow, a witness to what God has done in our lives.**

**I first encountered this story of Samuel in Sunday school when I was perhaps six-years-old. I was deeply impressed by the fact that God had something to say to a kid like myself. After Sunday dinner, later that afternoon, I took a walk in the wood behind our house in Nottingham, New Hampshire. It was a spring day, and I asked God if he had a plan for my life. The seed of pastoral ministry was planted in my soul that day, largely due to the witness of a Sunday school teacher. That is why I believe so strongly in Sunday school, vacation Bible school, church camp and youth group. The seeds of God-encounter that are planted there can shape and change a vocation, a life, a world.**

**Samuel does as Eli suggests. When the voice speaks yet once more, “Samuel! Samuel,” Samuel replies, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And the word of God is no longer rare for him, or, for that matter, Israel. God replies, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.” And with that encounter, the journey of Israel shifts, the prophetic word finds voice, and the royal path to Christ takes shape. All because someone listened, discerned who spoke, and responded, “Here I am, Lord...”**