

How to Listen
The Rev. Amy Spagna
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1 Samuel 3:1-20, John 1:43-51

"The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread" (1 Sam 3:1, NRSV)

That introduction could just as well describe our time as it did the last few years of ancient Israel's history between Joshua, Moses' successor, taking the land by storm and David becoming the king, couldn't it? Back then, well before Jerusalem and the temple were built, life was not filled with the free-flowing milk and honey that God had promised. The end of the Book of Judges, which immediately precedes 1 Samuel in terms of the historical timeline, describes a splintering of the Israelite community. It started with one man telling a half-truth about a crime, and using that lie to whip up a miniature civil war. The result of that conflict was that "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25, NRSV). That was, things were no better than they were before Moses and company arrived. There seemed to be attention to "religion" and God in general in a "yeah, I'm THIS, but don't really practice it" kind of way, and secular pursuits appear to have been more important than paying attention to God.

I've heard that line about modern America from various sources as well. Many of them lament the fact that Christianity in general, and evangelical Christianity in particular, no longer has the same kind of influence, much less participation, than it did "back in the good old days." There is a fair amount of data which back that assertion, including from a fairly recent Pew Research Center study on the general state of religion in the United States. Breaking down the responses by state, only 54 percent of Vermonters who responded claimed to hold some affiliation with Christianity; 8 percent

identified as "non-Christian;" and the remainder identified as so-called "nones" – that is, they don't participate in a community of faith of any type. 47 percent of survey participants responded that they seldom or never participated in any sort of worship service. And the vast majority – well over 75 percent in some cases – reported that they seldom or never prayed, meditated, or engaged in any kind of serious study of the Bible or theology.¹ And just as it was in Eli and Samuel's time, there are challenges when it comes to the "united" part of "United States." We're also seeing division and nuclear-level conflicts within churches and other faith communities when it comes to things like leadership and the pursuit of political power as a means to an end – which basically means that we're like the ancient Israelites, doing what is right in our own eyes.

However, in the middle of these sobering figures, the steady stream of news headlines about clergy who abuse their offices – which the writer of 1 Samuel describes Eli's sons having done at some length in the previous chapter – and reports of how "polarized" voters are right now, we get a reminder, through the vision of words presented to the child Samuel that God never really went away. Even if the people seem to have lost some of their capacity for listening and paying attention to God, God never stopped paying attention to THEM. Not only that, God will make Godself known to those who are willing to tune in to what God has to say.

We've been dropped into Samuel's story more or less at the tail end of the setup. His story begins with his parents, Elkanah and Hannah, and their inability to have children. Hannah in particular prayed long and hard for a son, and once she had Samuel, dedicated him to a lifetime of service to God out of her gratitude. Before

¹ "Adults in Vermont." *The Religious Landscape Study*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/state/vermont/> [accessed January 9, 2024].

Samuel became the great traveling prophet, judge, and kingmaker, he has much to learn. He is the apprentice of the old priest Eli, who, despite his shortcomings, has the wisdom and experience to discern that it is God who is rousing Samuel from sleep. He tells Samuel how to listen – and, despite the bad news God delivers, how to receive it.

One thing that stands out in this moment is the generational shift in authority from Eli to Samuel. Eli knows what to do when God appears – that is, to tell God to speak, for God's servant is listening. He blesses God despite the news that his family is doomed. And, Eli also knows that "Samuel's day is coming. His youth and newness show that God has not forgotten [God's] people, Israel. God will raise up faithfulness in the debris of human unfaithfulness."² Given the human tendency to hang onto familiar things long after those things have outlived their usefulness, this is good news. God will not allow the new generation just coming into its own to go unheard in its renewed calls for justice. The best days, when essentials were much cheaper and everyone just got along despite their differences, are not behind us. "No, the best are still to come, with yet more prophets, and an entire world redeemed. God's people cannot be known for our nostalgia. We must be known for our hope."³

It is only hope which can drive us forward: hope that tomorrow will be a better day based on what we do today; hope that we can, and will, pass on to successive generations what we have learned, and hope that God is not only somewhere in it, but will also choose to make God's presence known. It's that third thing – the hope that God

² Jason Byassee, "Commentary on 1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20)."
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-1-samuel-31-10-11-20-7> [accessed January 7, 2024].

³ Ibid.

is somewhere in it – which tells us that we do not necessarily have to be afraid of the change that's coming over the horizon. When we act out of that place of fear – which is the exact opposite of what Eli does here – it's what gets us into even bigger trouble. Nor is it a faithful reaction. The late Verna Dozier, an Episcopal theologian who was a fierce advocate for lay people and their ministries in the Church, once described fear as the opposite of faith. "Fear will not risk that even if I am wrong, I will trust that if I move today by the light that is given me, knowing it is only finite and partial, I will know more and different things tomorrow than I know today, and I can be open to the new possibility I cannot even imagine today."⁴

In Eli and Samuel's world, that new possibility was the vision of a nation where people didn't only do what was right in their own eyes. It was a place where things looked and worked a lot more like the God-given commandments and ordinances of which Moses reminded the people as he looked out over the land where he himself would never live. I suspect it's mostly the same for us as we look around at what God has so generously given us. That God is still here, and still speaks, are two of the relatively few things on which we can count. That is, if we are willing to quiet our own noise long enough to listen.

⁴ Verna J. Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (Boston, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1991), 61.