

**“Can You Hear Me?”**

*“Becoming a Child of God” – part 1*

*1 Samuel 3:1-21*

[52] Good Morning! Happy New Year! I want to start again by saying thank you to the entire congregation for your support during these last two weeks. Entering into the holiday season is always a precious, though slightly stressful time, and losing Katja’s mother five days before Christmas was especially hard. Church, you showed up in an amazing way. Thank you for the cards, the calls, the emails, the text messages, and the food you gave to us to remind us that we are not alone. It reminds us all of the beautiful thing that God does when we respond to his grace and love one another.

I don’t know about you, but I could use a fresh start today. If you are here for the first time, I want to let you know up front that we are not perfect. If we were, there would be no reason for us to be here. We are all people in need of God’s loving grace. We welcome you with open arms and hearts.

Would you please pray with me?

Almighty Father, we are here to listen to your Word. We know that you have something to tell us today, and we are ready to receive whatever it is. Mold us, shape us, form us into the new creation that you have been planning since the dawn of time. Teach us to have a childlike faith. I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart may be acceptable to You, LORD, my rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

[53] Have you ever asked God for something very important? I mean, have you ever pleaded with God, “Please, I’ll never ask for anything else again, just this one thing?” I’ve been in that place, actually, more than once, and it was a difficult time. I believe God was helping me become more patient, but I can’t say that I was overjoyed with the experience.

If you know what it is like to ask God for your deepest longing, you can relate to the story of Hannah, the mother of the Old Testament prophet, Samuel. The Bible tells us she would go with her husband to the tabernacle in Shiloh every year and pray. Even though she loved God and loved her husband, Hannah was barren.

[54] Hannah went to pour her heart out to God. She asked God for a son, and even promised to give the child back to God, if only the Lord would hear her prayer. What a precious, vulnerable moment she had with God, and how she must have trembled in her angst.

During this time, Eli, the priest, saw her praying, silently, and for some unknown reason, assumed she was drunk. If I had been Hannah, I can think of a few choice words I would have for Eli, and none of them I would say aloud, especially in church! It is a tribute to Hannah’s faithfulness and humility that she calmly explained to Eli, “Not so, my lord,” Hannah replied, “I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.” (vs. 1 Sam. 1:15-16)

[55] Eli blessed her, and God rewarded her faithfulness with a child, whom she named “Samuel”, which means “I asked the LORD for him.” Just stop and think for a moment: after her greatest desire was fulfilled, would she keep her promise? She, who was barren, now has her only son. And, yes, she still gave him up. Wow. After Samuel was weaned, Hannah took him back to the tabernacle and placed him in the service of God, under the very priest who had basically mocked her. Hannah did not hesitate to fulfill her promise; she possessed incredible strength.

And so the first part of this story, we see that God heard Hannah and answered her in a miraculous way, because of her faith. But God wasn’t done yet.

By the time the story reaches chapter 3, Samuel has lived and ministered at the tabernacle under Eli for a few years. Maybe Samuel was about twelve years old at this time. We have a lot of youth in our church close to that age. Can you imagine living in a monastery or nunnery, without your family, before you even finished high school? Ponder, if you can, what it would have felt like to be Samuel.

During Samuel’s life, God had been mostly silent, especially to his prophets and priests. We may relate today, when we seem to be asking God, “Where are you?” and do not hear what we expect. Even the priest, Eli, we are told, is blind and probably hard of hearing. It’s like God was waiting for the most unexpected moment to reveal himself, not to the priest whose job it was to listen, but in fact,

to the boy whose entire life was an offering to God, a choice he himself did not make.

[56] Here is the scene: Eli and Samuel are sleeping in the middle of the tabernacle, right next to the ark of the covenant. Samuel, who has just gone to bed, is awoken by someone calling his name. Naturally, he thinks it's his boss, so he jumps up and runs to Eli's side: "Here I am, you called me." (3:5)

Eli, who was asleep, is surprised and sends him back to bed. Samuel obeys and goes back to lie down. A short time later, Samuel again hears a voice calling his name. He goes over to Eli again, but, as before, he is sent back to his bed. I give Eli a little credit here. When my kids were young and crawled out of bed at night, I became irritated. Actually, Katja became irritated. Jonah once woke her up at six in the morning, asking, "Mom, Mom, MOM! MOMMY! Can I put on my soccer uniform for my game tonight?", while poking her. I can laugh about this now, but I know Katja told him the first time "Sure, whatever, go ahead," and went back to sleep!

Eli, however, gently tells Samuel, "My son, ... I did not call; go back and lie down." You can tell how fond Eli is of the boy.

Finally, the third time God speaks to Samuel, Eli figures out what is happening. Obviously Eli is a bit rusty in the "talking to God" department. This isn't just a little boy coming to his side in the middle of the night; this is a vision from God. Eli instructs Samuel to go back and lie down, with this additional command: When you hear the voice, say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening." (3:9b)

[57] The Lord was patient with both Samuel and Eli. God calls Samuel again, and this time Samuel is ready. Samuel does as he is instructed and tells the Lord that he is ready to listen.

The word of God is about to finally be heard again in Israel. This time, the high priest would not be the recipient of the message, but rather a young boy, who was born as an answer to prayer and dedicated to the service of God. Even though Samuel serves God diligently, he has not been introduced to who God really is. He does not know what to make of the voice he is hearing, but he does not question Eli's command and opens himself up to be filled with the word of God.

This a great story. A young boy is called by God. So why are we talking about it today?

[58] Just like in Samuel’s time, today we struggle to hear the word of God. Distractions and opinions try to convince us that they are the most important thing right now. If we are honest, we have asked ourselves if the Word of God can even be heard by anyone anymore.

Like Hannah, we face lots of personal battles. Some of us have faced infertility, the loss of a child or parent, bullying, or depression. How badly do we long to hear God call our name in those times? We can identify with Hannah. She longed for a family to love and care for, even if it she had to let go after just a short time. Despite her devastation, she pulled herself together and went to the Lord in her prayer and was rewarded for it.

[59] Yet it is Samuel that intrigues me the most. It was not his choice to leave his parents. Hannah must have done a phenomenal job of grounding him in the short time she had with him. He fulfilled his mother’s vow without grumbling or complaining. He was very young when Hannah dropped him off at Eli’s “Tabernacle Long-term Daycare”. Samuel might have been only 4 years old, and from then on he only got to see his parents once a year.

[60] Despite his strange start, despite Eli’s questionable care, despite even the horrible role modeling from Eli’s sons, Samuel served the Lord in the tabernacle. He eventually replaced Eli as the high priest, becoming the last and greatest judge of Israel, a prophet to the nation, and the anointer of kings. Samuel listened to God, and followed the voice he heard.

Samuel, the boy who was placed in the service of God without any say, rose to the expectations placed in front of him. He surpassed them and made himself a vessel for the Lord; he was willing to make God the most important thing in his life. Even though Eli had to teach him how to actually respond to God’s calling, Samuel was unquestioning and knew how to listen. He met God as a child with his child-like faith. He was not corrupted by his surroundings.

Why do we talk about Samuel today? To remind us that God does not look at age; he looks at our heart and our willingness to serve. If a twelve-year old boy, who had not even been exposed to the word of God, can learn to listen to God, how much more should we be able to open our lives up to God?

[61] We long to hear from God in our lives. While we might hear from him directly, most often it will be indirect little “nudges”. Maybe we need to train our “inner-ear” to recognize those better.

Once Katja and I were helping some missionaries in Germany, and we visited a young man in his apartment. He had invited us to share our faith and explain who God was. I remember being very nervous: my German wasn’t great, and I had no idea what this man expected. Oh, and Katja was a new Christian herself, so we seemed like an unlikely pair to share the gospel. And yet, as we spoke both of us felt the calm and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We were able to spontaneously show him Bible verses. All three of us had an interest in God’s word, but ultimately only Katja and I were ready to hear from God directly and be guided by his Word.

This kind of guidance might not happen every time to everyone. Yet if we ground ourselves in prayer and anticipate God will speak to us, God will find a way to meet us where we are.

[62] There will be times in our lives where it will be easier to discern God’s voice. When we are filled with raw emotions, our hearts are open and long to be filled. C.S. Lewis said that “God whispers to us in joy, speaks to us in sorrow, shouts to us in pain”. Even though pain is not something we long to experience, maybe, like Hannah, it opens us up to a deeper encounter with our God, who wants to comfort us.

[63] All of us can learn to listen better for God’s voice. We can help each other by our words, our prayers, and even our accountability and encouragement. God is ready and willing to speak to us. The first part of becoming a child of God may be simply to expect the unexpected, and when we encounter God, to be still and say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Let’s pray now as we continue to listen for God’s voice.

Memory Verse: Matthew 19:14

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Recall a time when you really, desperately, wanted to hear God’s voice. What was happening?
2. When do you feel closest to God and most able to listen? When do you feel furthest from God? What might the difference be?
3. What does it mean to you to have a childlike faith? What aspects of that faith most appeal to you?
4. How can you learn from the example of Hannah and Samuel to trust God and listen for his voice?