

Listen God is speaking!

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1–10 (11–20)

Introduction/Image: Learning something new! Pastor Natalie Hanson in Buffalo New York tells this story:

A retired couple lived in a Miami neighborhood that was in transition from middle class Anglo to blue-collar Hispanic. One by one those who had raised their families in the community made arrangements to move; some further out into the suburbs and some into Senior Housing developments. After church, some longtime neighbors approached the couple to say: “We’ve sold our house, and we’re moving in a month. What are your plans?” The older couple looked at each other and replied, “We’re going to learn Spanish.”

I love this story! An older couple who was gracious to embrace what is coming in favor of God’s future. She pushed me with questions: “Can I bracket my way of doing things in order to welcome and nurture new generations of leadership? Can I place the meaning of life more in God than my own creations and be freed to let go and change? Can I learn the language of my immigrant neighbor or my youngest daughter? Those questions challenge me and poke at one of my fears. At the age of 55 and getting ready to become a grandfather for the first time – can I continue to grow in my practice of ministry that will impact future generations? When I was a young pastor I remember a time saying, “If I ever get so set in my ways and settle into ministry without energy or vision – then it is time to find something else to do...” It came after listening to three middle aged pastors crabbing about something new that was stimulating ministry in a new area of the synod. Some of you may have similar fears of settling into something rather than growing in new directions. Over the years, one thing I admire about my dad, he never stops growing or appreciating his opportunities of continuing education; even now in retirement. He is a beautiful mentor willing to learn the newest practice of ministry.

Indwelling: ***There is an old saying; you just can’t send a boy to do a man’s work. Or can you?*** Well, God calls a child to do a man’s job. God seemed to do just that. In fact, God did that a number of times: Jacob, Moses, David, Jonah, Jeremiah, Mary, Paul. And in today’s lesson Samuel.

It is a dark time in the history of God’s people. We read that “The word of the Lord was rare in those days” (1 Sam 3:1). Eli is getting old and feeble. The opening line says his eyesight was beginning to go and his sons are pathetic failures; they were priests and even cursed God. There were some deep disappointments in Eli’s life.

So God calls a child to carry on his work rather than someone more experienced and educated – young Samuel. In chapter 2 Samuel's resume is limited to a faithful mother, Hannah. Her faith placed Samuel in the care of the priest Eli after God blessed her with a child. Hannah faithfully visits him at the temple. Samuel is growing in favor with God and with the people. But that's it. That is his entire resume. And this is the one who will deliver a message to the people so stunning that it "will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle" (v. 11).

He is only a boy, most likely – pre-confirmation age. Evidently Samuel is not used to hearing the voice of God, because it took four tries and a suggestion from an old priest to get the communication started between Samuel and God? On the other hand, maybe the old priest isn't accustomed to God's voice, either, if it takes him three tries to set Samuel on the right path. The opening sentence in our lesson says: "The Word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."

"Samuel, Samuel," the call goes out. "Here I am," responds Samuel, but to Eli, not to the one who calls.

"Samuel," the call goes out. "Here I am," responds Samuel a second time to Eli, and a second time incorrectly.

The call goes out for the third time, and Samuel responds, "Here I am." Samuel is consistent in his willingness to serve. But Samuel is still addressing the wrong party. After the third misadventure, Eli instructs the boy, if called again, to answer, "**Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening**" (v. 9). Then the call comes a fourth time, "Samuel, Samuel!" And the line of communication between God and Samuel is opened as Samuel responds, "**Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.**"

Eli tells me that even an old man can begin anew! "**Can I bracket my way of doing things in order to welcome and nurture new generations of leadership?**" Eli becomes the mentor that leads Samuel to respond.

But the first Word given to Samuel is a very difficult one, especially hard for his beloved Eli, whose family will be punished for their sin and wickedness. In the morning Eli asks about the message from God, but Samuel hesitates to speak the message for fear it will hurt Eli. Eli persists, and Samuel tells it all – his first exercise at telling the truth of God, no matter how disturbing. Imagine, a 12-year-old boy delivering a word of judgment to a long-standing priest – one who has been his mentor! Do you remember the other opening question: **Can I place the meaning of life more in God than my own creations and be freed to let go and change?** Eli was now open to the leadership of Samuel – a boy. This first assignment would be one of many for Samuel who was priest, prophet, judge and an incredible intercessor of prayer. Like his mentor Eli when Samuel was old he anointed his sons as judges over Israel, yet they did not follow his God-honoring ways. This led to the people of Israel demanding a king! But even Samuel did not get set in his own ways and as old man was open to a new direction – He anointed the first king Saul and then the second David. And David was one who walked in Samuel's footsteps, living a life of prayer and intimacy with God. But what does this have to do with you and me this morning?

“Speak Lord for your servant is listening...”

Immediacy: And what of today? Is God still choosing people who are young, who can't speak well, who are not educated and who seem even hostile to Word? Is God calling you? This is a story about a God who does not just call the qualified but qualifies the called. Hey, God does not always call the most qualified adult candidates, but God calls a child. I find this both ironic and startling, for it calls into question the deeply cherished assumption that the experienced, the educated and the privileged are the vessels through which God works. Last week I invited a gifted adult to be one of our hospitality visitors and their response was – “Oh, I do not know my Bible very well and I would feel so inadequate...” Last week Mark shared the call of Richard Stearns to become the CEO of World Vision. He too felt that God needed someone else other than himself. We all know this struggle, don't we? We have all bowed down the cherished assumption that only the most gifted can apply...then we have Jesus who tears this assumption apart in the Gospel lesson when he invited the least spectacular folks – there are fishermen, a tax collector – quite ordinary people who were fathers, mothers, brothers sisters and friends. You would think that if Jesus wanted to get something done in a hurry, he would have picked some priests and scribes and lawyers. Maybe Jesus would have included a Roman governor or even an emperor into his group of close disciples. But, no, Jesus seems satisfied to invite quite ordinary people.

Imitation: Who among us is exempt from God's invitation to follow? Most of us in this place are quite ordinary. This doesn't preclude the possibility that there could be someone who is quite extraordinary among us – a few millionaires, a past or future Olympian, a politician who can touch the lives of thousands, the best doctor in the world. Surely such people sit among the people of God. One of the most innovative communicators of our era Steve Jobs worshipped with the same ELW we are using at worship today in one of our ELCA congregations, actually he once was an acolyte assisting at worship. Yet most of us claim no great place in history. We do our jobs, we raise our families, we care for our homes, and we go to school – whatever it is that takes us through the week.

And God is calling us. God is calling us or we wouldn't be here today! When God calls, we tend to be like Samuel and do not hear God's voice correctly. Or we may make excuses like Moses and Jeremiah. Or we might run the other way like Jonah. Yet God calls and calls and calls.

God's people have been answering for centuries; answering in the name of Christ.

Who is it that shepherds our children in Rotation Sunday school? They are quite ordinary people whom the Spirit calls and equips. Some teach Sunday school for many years. Others go from teaching to some other calling in the church. My godfather called me to oversee the activities in the gym. Another pastor asked if I would help prepare and serve meals for youth on confirmation nights. Later they asked me to teach and then it seemed I couldn't say no to seminary (when several of them suggested), and this year marks my 30th year as an ordained pastor in the church. There were a lot of Eli's who were teaching me to listen and learn God's voice – yet as I get older I pray that I can also be one who can help another say: ***“Speak Lord for your servant is listening...”*** I don't want to become a middle aged pastor set only in his ways...settling for the past.

In the end: (We all have the capacity to learn something new - this means all of you!)

We all have the capacity to learn something new! Who serves on the altar guild? Who provides leadership for the church council and all the teams of ministry at Covenant? Who goes on the mission trips to assist people whose lives have been touched by floods, tornadoes or hurricanes, or trips to other lands to share good news with sisters and brothers a world away? Who goes to work everyday and lives out their faith by the respect and love demonstrated in the work place? Who is a wonderful spouse, parent, grandparent, bother or sister or friend? It was Eleanor Nygaard who taught me that one can line dance in their 90's, it is Norm and Vajeen Sime who remind me that people can dance for competition and enjoy it, it is Joe Ellwanger who continues to mentor people into works of justice as he draws on 80, it is Blanca Irma Rodrigez who reminded me that I had more in my pocket for spending money (\$400) than she made in two years as a lead pastor in El Poppa El Salvador, it is my children who remind me of the gift of forgiveness; when I am most unforgivable, it is a baby that reminds my of the value of being a grandpa...but it was my grandparents who taught me how to love a new grandchild!

Aren't we all rather ordinary? And might we not even dismiss ourselves from consideration because we are nothing special? Would it be alright with all of you if we let the cherished assumption that you need something other than God's call to serve God in a special way—simply die; remembering that we are special in the eyes of God. We are called in baptism to let our lights shine. One is never too young or old or rich or poor to serve God. Listen, listen: God is speaking! Amen.

Children's Time: Hearing God's Message

(Bring cell phone, printed email message, The Promise and a Bible. Give Chris the message so he can text me and interrupt the time with the kids)

Now I just found out that I am going to be a grandpa! And I want to tell others, how could I tell others that Jocelyn and Kevin are going to have a baby in late July or early August? What are some ways we share good news with each other? *(Phone calls, email, text message, letters, and in person are possible responses.)*

Which of these things can we use to deliver God's message? *(All of them.)* We also use radio, the television, web page and music. Who are some people who can deliver God's message? *(Pastor, Sunday school teachers, musicians, parents, friends, you, anyone.)* The Bible has many messages about God for us. I'd like to read one of my favorite messages about God to you.

(I will open the Bible and then my cell phone needs to ring a new text. Mark, I want you to text me during this time, these words: Sorry to interrupt you but it's very important. Tell the children: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." That's all? We'll talk later, bye! God)

That's amazing! That was the same Bible verse I was going to read to you! God just texted me – even God is high – tech!

Prayer: Creator God, open our ears so we can hear the good news of your love for us. Amen.

Hymn of the Day

Rise, Shine, You People! #665

Each time I read the story of Philip telling his friend Nathanael about Jesus, I have to smile. There's no sense of Philip looking down his nose at Nathanael, no sense that he had a prepared speech to share. It's just a spontaneous, joyful, one-friend-to-another sharing: "We've found him! Come and see!" For me, Ronald Klug's "Rise, Shine, You People!" displays the same enthusiasm and calling Philip must have felt that day – an infectious, wonderfully natural enthusiasm. Dale Wood's bold and brassy music turns up the temperature, and the result is a blazingly good congregational hymn.