

Call Waiting
Sermon on 1 Samuel 3:1-20 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, January 15, 2006

Although my parents taught me that it is impolite to discuss one's personal finances with others, I don't mind telling you that I am currently paying over \$100 a month for my phone bill. I have no idea why this is so. I certainly don't feel as though I'm getting \$100 worth of phone service. I am probably paying this outrageously high price because I am a chump and a sucker for packages full of options I never use much less understand. (Thus it may be a good thing that at the age of 34 I have never actually purchased a new car from a genuine car dealership.) I use the DSL feature included in the package, and that's very handy. I have unlimited long distance, which I use to call perhaps five people for a total of less than three hours a month. I have caller ID, but no mechanism to identify the caller. I also have call waiting, but I talk by telephone with so few people that I hardly ever use it. So rarely have I used this feature that I don't think I would recognize the call waiting signal if it happens again. I'm waiting for call waiting.

The same was true in the days of Eli the priest: "the word of the Lord was rare in those days" (1 Sam. 3:1b). It is an ominous note in unsettled times: God had withheld his word at a time when his people needed to hear from him. For it was, according to Bruce Birch, "a time of spiritual desolation, religious corruption, political danger, and social upheaval."¹ The God Willimon loves to describe as "talkative" and "distinguished for his loquaciousness," the God who since the beginning has not ceased to talk, to engage his people in conversation, has fallen strangely silent. And the silence of God is a fearsome thing. The Psalmist writes, "If you remain silent, I will be like those who have gone down to the pit" (Ps. 28:1) and "Our God comes and will not be silent; a fire devours before him, and around him a tempest rages" (Ps. 50:3).

¹ Bruce C. Birch, *The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary, and Notes*, New Interpreters Bible, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 994.

As troubling as the rarity of God's word was, there was yet more trouble: God did not reveal himself in visions. Without a word from the Lord, the people of God lacked direction and guidance. Even Eli, the old priest, who was trained and consecrated to see visions, could no longer do so: His eyesight was failing and he could not see. One night he was lying down in his room. It is night, there is darkness, Eli cannot see, but we are told that "the lamp of God had not yet gone out" (3:3a). There was still a glimmer of light, a faint ray of hope. God was not finished speaking. In another room, waiting in the wings, is Samuel, the boy dedicated by his parents to God's service, lying down in the temple of the Lord where the ark of God was.

Samuel had grown up "ministering to the Lord under Eli" (3:1a). He served as the priest's assistant, helping him with his religious duties. Despite being raised in the very heart of Israel's national shrine and serving with Israel's leading religious figure, Samuel was a long way from a direct relationship with God. Even though he sleeps near the Ark of the Covenant, which for Israel was the place where God dwelt and could be found, Samuel cannot perceive what is really happening.

And I cannot help but think that Samuel's situation is not that different from ours. How many of us have grown up in the church, been cradle Episcopalians or Presbyterians or Baptists or Methodists, or grown up in the parsonage, and yet feel very distant from God? How many of us have attended Sunday school, served on church committees, sung in the choir, come to worship, only to feel that God has yet to speak to us? How many of us long to hear the voice of God, calling us by name? How many of us need to know that "the lamp of God has not yet gone out," that God is not finished speaking, that there is a fresh word, a new call for us, a claim yet to be made on our lives?

The voice of God can be hard to hear. Some who claim to speak for God say natural disasters are God's punishment for sin or that personal affliction is the consequence of slighting Israel in world affairs. Some who claim to speak for God are interested in you becoming wealthy beyond all imagining or that through prayer you will defeat enemies and sickness and pain. Some who claim to speak for God molest children or abuse drugs and alcohol. I often wonder if these who claim to speak for God—if I myself—have stopped to listen for the word of God. Perhaps, as Dan Clendenin suggests, God has “stop[ped] speaking as a consequence of our not listening.”² The story of Samuel teaches that if we are to hear God, we must be listening.

Three times the Lord called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and three times the boy ran to Eli, each time saying, “Here I am, for you called me.” Each time, Eli would insist that he had not called his young protégé and sent him back to bed. We do not need to think that Samuel is unusually dense or naïve. He is still a young man, and as we have noted, he lived in a time when the word of the Lord was rare and visions were infrequent. In fact, Samuel really has no basis on which to recognize God's call: Samuel did not know the Lord, nor had God's word been revealed to him. To be anachronistic, Samuel did not yet have a “personal relationship” with God as Lord and Savior. Without that relationship, without spiritual knowledge that comes from a personal experience of God as he reveals himself, it is unreasonable for us to expect the boy to realize what is taking place.

But the good news of the story is that God does reveal himself. The Lord calls to Samuel a fourth time, indicating God's persistence and insistence on having his way with us. God will not let Samuel or Eli get a good night's sleep until he has spoken. Poor Samuel keeps having to get up in the middle of the night, tired and disoriented, when it is hard to see, to answer a call

² Dan Clendenin, “Samuel and the Silence of God: So You Wish to Hear a Word?” for Sunday, January 15, 2006 from *The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself* at <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20060109JJ.shtml>.

from an unknown source. Samuel does not ignore the call or get angry when there aren't answers where he thinks they ought to be. He always gets up and goes to Eli and attends to the old man. And for some time the priest has no answers. Sometimes institutional religion is slow to respond. Sometimes the institution of the church is slow to recognize that God is acting and speaking in new ways. But the church can be the means through which we hear God's Word anew. It is on the third try that Eli realizes what is happening, that the Lord is calling Samuel. Thus he instructs Samuel to return to bed, to listen for the call, and to be prepared with a response. If the Lord calls, Samuel is to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

That bedside scene tells us so much about how we are to listen for God's word: to look for the repeated attempt to get our attention, to assume the posture of a servant, to acknowledge that we are ready and willing to receive what God would say to us. The bedside scene also speaks to the importance of spiritual mentors or guides. It has taken someone else, someone mature and experienced, to listen, to reflect, to realize, and to advise. Without Eli, Samuel would not have understood that it was God who was calling him. And thus community becomes an important way in which God's calling on our lives can be clarified and confirmed. Bruce Birch reminds us that "[L]ike Samuel, we may not ourselves recognize the call of God. It may be others, like Eli, who discern the divine presence first and name the divine name so that we may be enabled to respond."³

And so friends, this morning let me ask you: Do you have call waiting? In a day and time when God's word can be hard to hear, can you recognize when God is speaking to you? Do you know God in such a personal way that you can hear when he calls you by name? Do you have mentors or teachers in the faith who with you can listen and discern your call? And when God calls, are you prepared to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening?"

³ Birch, 995.