

Speak Lord, for your servant is listening

1 Samuel 3:1-9, 11-20

Good Morning Church Family,

Last month, I had an online conversation with my Pastor Peer group about God's voice in our lives. Specifically, it was about how different cultures and faith traditions called Pastors into ministry. Ken Bechtel, our group historian on all things Mennonite, talked about how Mennonite ministers used to be called by "the lot." Doesn't that sound intimidating? Any time we put a "the" in front of a noun it sounds way more frightening. When the time came for a Mennonite church to choose a new minister from among their attendees, the elders and bishops of the church would select from among the congregation 5-6 people (okay, not people, actually just men) who they felt would be worthy of the role. The Bishop for their region would then set up "the lot", a room with a table with as many Bibles or Hymnals as there were candidates. Then men would then enter the room and select a book from the table. Inside one of the books would be a paper with the verse Proverbs 16:33, and I'll quote from the King James Version of the Bible here, "The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision *is* from the LORD." And that man then became the new minister. Of course, this process wasn't foolproof. Lots of stories would float around about "winking Bishops". People claimed that when the man the Bishop wanted to see in the minister's role entered the room, he'd wink towards a particular book on the table, signalling to his favourite candidate which book

to grab.

We laugh about this, but sometimes our current methods come across just as humorously. Jeanette Hanson, who is the Director for MC Canada's Witness Worker Program, told the story of the time several Chinese pastors came to visit Canada to connect with pastors and churches here. These pastors heard stories about how the candidating process for Pastors worked in Canada- interviews, meet and greets, and eventually a congregational vote by all the members. She found the table of Chinese pastors laughing to themselves. "What's so funny?", she asked. They replied, "Oh you Canadians love democracy so much, you even use it in your churches!"

Joking aside, these two anecdotes illustrate an interesting point. How do you, how do we know when you're hearing the voice of the Lord? How do you know when God is calling you to something? How do we sift through the voices in our lives-God, our friends, our family, our culture, or our own internal voice? Do we know the voice of the Lord by a feeling...something tingly in our fingertips? Some sense of resolve in our chests? Some deep knowing in our minds? Can a person speak on behalf of the Lord? Who are those people and how do we find them? These are some of the questions that came up for me when I was reading through our scripture for this morning.

In the scripture that Carrol read for us this morning, we find the story of Samuel's calling as a prophet. You may remember that Samuel was the long anticipated son of Hannah and Elkanah. Elkanah, Samuel's father, had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Hannah

was unable to bear children, while Peninnah had many children. Peninnah made no attempts to hide her contempt for Hannah, and shamed her for her lack of children. Year after year, when Elkanah's household made the pilgrimage to the temple to offer their annual sacrifice, Hannah would cry out to the lord for a child of her own. She promised the Lord that if he would give her a child, just one child, she would give that child back to God in his service. The Lord heard Hannah's earnest, honest prayer and she became pregnant and gave birth to Samuel. After Samuel was weaned, scholars suggest this was around 3-4 years of age, Hannah brought Samuel back to the Tabernacle to serve there. He helped the then High Priest, Eli, with the business of the tabernacle. That's a bit of Samuel's backstory.

The story we heard this morning takes place when Samuel is about 12 years old. This is age that was suggested by Josephus, a first century Jewish historian. Samuel and his mentor, Eli, are fast asleep when Samuel hears a voice calling his name, "Samuel! Samuel!". He throws off his blanket, assuming that Eli is calling him from the next room over. Her appears at Eli's bedside, "Here I am!" Now, as any parent knows, the moment your kid walks in the room and awakes you from a sound sleep is jarring. Eli wakes with a start, "What? What's happening?" "You called me." "No I didn't, go back to bed." Samuel does as Eli says. Weird he thinks. Maybe I was dreaming? He returns to his bed. The same thing happens again- Samuel! Samuel! Okay, he's certain this time that he heard Eli calling him. He reports immediately to Eli's bedside. Now, as any parent knows, the first time your child appears at your bedside is jarring, the second time it's downright annoying. Eli, a little irritable, says, "Samuel. Son. I did not call you. Go. back

to bed.” Samuel does so. And it all happens a third time. God calls Samuel’s name and he shows up at Eli’s side, “You called me?” In that moment it dawns on Eli, this is no dream, no figment of the boy’s imagination. Someone is calling Samuel, and Eli knows it’s not him. It’s the Lord. This time, wide awake and clear headed, he tells Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

It is then that the Lord delivers his first message of many to Samuel- he would cut off Eli’s line because of the wickedness of his sons and Eli’s failure to stop them. The first message entrusted to Samuel was one of judgment on his father figure, Eli.

The next morning, eager to hear what had transpired, Eli asks Samuel, “So, what did the Lord say?” Samuel hesitates. This isn’t good news and he loves Eli and his role at the Tabernacle. Eli senses his hesitations and tells Samuel to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Samuel tells Eli exactly what the Lord said. Eli to his credit says, “He is the Lord, let him do what is best. This encounter with God, this voice in the night, was the beginning of Samuel’s story as one of the most celebrated and revered Prophets in the story of God’s people. The final verses of chapter 3 say this, “The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a

prophet of the LORD. The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.”

This is a story about calling, both literally and figuratively. The Lord called out to Samuel with a very specific, timely message and the Lord called Samuel as a Prophet into his service in the dark sleeping quarters of the tabernacle. Now, it would be a misjudgment that this story with all its nuance would turn into something prescriptive- 3 easy steps to knowing and doing the will of God. At the same time, I do think this story offers some important touchstones on listening to the voice of God and discerning what God may be calling us to as individuals or as a collective. So, let's talk about some of the things going in this story.

First, and most importantly, this scripture reminds us to Pay Attention. Pay Attention.

As people of faith, we believe that God is present and at work in every situation, in every circumstance and in everyday life. There is no line of separation between the world that we live in and the place that God dwells. Jesus made that clear to us. So, if we believe that God is at work, we can also believe that God is speaking, that God is communicating, that God is moving in our lives. Following God's leading is not designed to be a treasure hunt where you have to keep your eye glued on the map, lest you make a wrong turn. God's heart for his people doesn't involve keeping his calling on our lives a secret, a combination lock that we have to turn just right to unlock, but it does involve

paying attention, looking and listening for the people and places where God may be speaking to you.

This summer, when I was considering the role at Mount Royal, I did some sessions with a Spiritual Director. The work of Spiritual Direction is really to help people notice and process the ways that God is already at work in their lives, the ways that God is speaking to them. Each session, my spiritual director, Lynn, and I would talk for about an hour on zoom and she would ask me guiding questions. Where do you feel this decision in your body? How have you known God's way for yourself in the past? What conversations or happenings this week might be God speaking to you? Initially, I found myself grasping for straws. Uh...maybe this? Or maybe that's just a thought I had? But as I knew the next session was coming and she was going to ask me those same questions again, I started paying more attention to the conversations I was having with people and looking for ways that God may be speaking to me.

I was reading an article on discernment and calling this week, and the writer made a very good point that the time to practice "paying attention" is now, not when you're on the cusp of some big transition or wondering what God's path for you may be. The time to practice paying attention is now. This writer went on to say that there is no one preferred answer in life, but rather the will of God in our lives is to live in the Way of Jesus. And that can look a million different ways for a million different people. Discerning God's will in our lives is not about discerning the answer to one specific

question, rather it's about discerning where the presence of God is and moving towards that.

Now in my life, and in the busy lives that I know many of us lead, the act of paying attention can be incredibly challenging. So many things vying for our attention- work, family, community, volunteerism, our own health and hobbies. But learning to hear the voice of God within the noise of daily life is a spiritual practice worth pursuing. Jude Tiesma Watson, Associate Professor of Urban Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary said this, ““We have to be able to listen to God, but I also think we have to learn to really listen to our own hearts and what’s happening within us. Otherwise, what we think is God might be us. So there's a discernment of learning to listen to God, to our family, to each other. I often think of that as attentiveness. Attentiveness is the opposite of distraction. So in the history of Christian spirituality, there’s a lot that’s written about being attentive, being attentive to God. A lot of times we think of being attentive as something we do when we’re quiet. We’re listening to God, so we have to be in this quiet room or on a retreat. But here the context makes such a difference again. For me, it’s also learning to listen in the midst of the city.” So that’s such an important piece, I’m learning, paying attention.

Secondly, like Samuel, we need to remember that listening to God’s voice, discerning what God might be saying to us is not a solo endeavor. Samuel needed Eli to help him to realize that it was God speaking to him, to realize that the voice was not in his own

head or even Eli's voice. We all need trusted friends, mentors, sisters and brothers in Christ to help us sift through the noise.

When I first started considering pastoral ministry, I realized how strongly Anabaptists hold to this idea of inner (in the individual's heart and spirit) and outer (in the collective, the people they are around them) calling, and how the alignment of those two things is an important factor in helping to discern God's voice. When I told a few trusted friends that I was thinking about maybe possibly going into ministry and would they pray for me, they all said yes, of course, I could see you there.

This act of listening for God together also helps us to avoid the pitfalls of pride or self-involvement. I think of this fellow that I knew that at College, and Christian Colleges are full of young adults eager to find the "one", their romantic partner and get married. This fellow told me (about a girl that he'd started dating about two weeks prior), "God told me that I'm going to marry her." "God told you that?" "Yes", "How do you know that God said that to you?" "I just know. It was so clear." The problem was it wasn't clear to anyone except for him, including the girl he was seeing! And this is where the voice of the wise community is needed to offer caution, to practice restraint, and to pray and wrestle on this with him.

When we know ourselves in community, God can use that community to discern what is God's voice and what is our own voice. Kate Bowler wrote, "The thing about our lives is we stare into an unknown future, and we walk forward, and this is part I think of trying to

make sense of things. It gets really complicated when you try to figure out what counts as God's favor, what counts as a sign? When I make determinations about what God hopes for me, and I make them based on God's character, I'm on solid ground. But if I look at my life and say what did I deserve and was this because of faithfulness, I find that's probably either narcissism or a very imprecise kind of hope."

Lastly, once we have wrestled and discerned and are confident in God's voice and leading in our lives, we must then stand firm in that calling. Because doing the will of God does not mean that we will never counter opposition. In Samuel's case, he knew that God had told him a message that would ruin Eli's family, but he shared it anyway. God's path will very likely be full of unexpected turns, places of deep grace and deep disappointment, but God's accompaniment of us on that path is the reason we stay on it.

In closing, I wanted to share one thing that my Spiritual Director shared with me this summer. She said that in her experience, when people deeply and truly want to be where God is calling them to be, God is faithful and meets people there. Sometimes that means practicing paying attention. Sometimes it means opening yourself up to community, or submitting to the wisdom of the faithful people in your life. Sometimes that means holding fast, even in the face of opposition. Whatever that may look like in your life, know that God is there with, alive and at work in the lives of his dearly beloved children. Amen.