BUFFALO
UNITED METHODIST

Sun May 10 - I'm Really Listening | 1 Samuel 3:1-14

In 1 Samuel, we learn God's voice becomes clearest not in isolation, but in community, specifically when generations listen to one another with humility and courage.

In the spring of 1998, I went into the office of the Pastor of Adult Ministries at Open Door to talk. This was NOT the norm for me. And I talked with him about something that just wasn't making sense in my life.

I explained how I was doing all these things for God each week, but it just didn't seem like enough. I explained it wasn't coming from a place of trying to earn God's love, quite the opposite. I knew God loved me and I was so grateful. But I was frustrated and confused and I didn't know why.

His response…? "Do you think you are being called into ministry?"

And being just as deaf to God's voice as Samuel, I said, "No, I don't believe in that kind of thing."

And then round two, "Well, what about exploring this a bit more? Have you ever thought of attending seminary?"

And that made sense to me, and just like Eli with Samuel, he framed it in a way that helped me "hear" my next steps with God.

God was speaking but I just didn't have the ears to hear. And I wish that had been the only time I couldn't hear.

And so, Scott being older and a perfect Eli for me, set me off on a long journey of discerning my call, leading me to be standing right here today. Living into the truth that God calls every one of us.

It was the spring of the year 2000 and I called my mom. I had to call her. I had to talk to her about a hard truth I had just heard.

When I got her on the phone, I told her dad had called me recently. He told me that the doctors said the cancer was still growing around the cervical area on her spine, they didn't believe her body could take another surgery, and so they were placing her on hospice.

And I told her that because of that I was going to be coming home as much as I could over the summer. I explained I wanted to spend as much time with her as I could.

In that moment, I wasn't the Samuel learning to listen—I was the Samuel carrying a word no one wanted to hear. And sometimes, that's what happens when we grow in faith. We move from being a Samuel who can't hear into a Samuel who is entrusted with truth to share.

And those last few months with my mom were holy.

And the longer you live, the more you move into Eli's role and take on his job. I had a Samuel sit in my office last Sunday and speak a hard truth. And my job in that moment wasn't to fix it, it was to listen.

As we continue in our sermon series Generations, I also had a couple of conversations last Sunday with a couple of wonderful Eli's who were grandparents.

They said something simple and profound: 'The hardest part of being a grandparent… is listening to your kids say the exact same things you once said to them.'

Your kids were listening but they weren't going to let you know that. **Too cool for school.**

Often our role is to plant seeds and leave it to God for the watering and growth.

Listening is hard. At every stage of life… it's hard.

In 1 Samuel 3:1–18, the story opens in a spiritually quiet time when God's voice is rarely heard.

Into that silence comes an almost comical scene: young Samuel hears his name called in the night and, assuming it must be the elderly priest Eli, sprints to his bedside: "Here I am—you called me!"

Eli, groggy and confused, sends him back to bed. This happens not once, not twice, but three times, creating a kind of holy misunderstanding. They both lost a lot of sleep that night.

But it also highlights God's lavish grace and incredible patience. Samuel is eager and responsive, but completely misreading the source. Eli is clueless but gentle and then wise.

What starts more like a sitcom with all the back and forth, ends on a heavier note.

Samuel moves from not being able to hear to the Samuel who must speak. The humor is real but so is the accountability.

The humor lies in Samuel's innocence and urgency; he is ready to serve but doesn't yet recognize God's voice.

Meanwhile, the deeper irony is that Eli—the seasoned spiritual leader—is slow to perceive what God is up to.

Eventually, Eli realizes the Lord is calling the boy and with wisdom instructs Samuel in how to respond. **"Speak Lord for your servant is listening."**

The tone then shifts sharply. When God finally speaks, the message is not lighthearted but judgment against Eli's household for unchecked sin.

This text reveals to us a gracious God who is always reaching out to us, speaking and inviting us into relationship, helping us discern God's voice in community that is marked by humility and courage between the generations.

First, God is always reaching out to us. From the very first verse, "In those days the word of the Lord was rare." The author of 1 Samuel pinpoints the problem. People had stopped listening and so from the human perspective God wasn't speaking.

But God didn't withdraw into a sulky silence. Instead, here we are reminded of how God remains present and active. God kept looking for someone who would listen to him. Which leads us into this down to earth, late night, back and forth conversation.

A little context might be helpful here before we go much further. Israel is in a spiritually fragile and morally compromised season. It is arguably one of the lowest points between the conquest of Canaan and the rise of the monarchy.

Here's the landscape leading into that passage. Israel is in the era described in the Book of Judges, where: **"Everyone did what was right in their own eyes."** (Judges 21:25)

People were not seeking to hear from God, it wasn't a priority or something valued. They were not spending time practicing humility by praying, **"Speak Lord for your servant is listening."**

Today, maybe many of us feel God's voice is absent amidst the world's noise.

The noise is not just "out there" it seeps into "here" (point to head and heart). Polarizing political agendas, the constant scrolling, overwhelm and exhaustion sets in until we withdraw, disengage, and settle with doing the bare minimum.

Isolating makes it hard to hear God calling out to us. It causes us to struggle to hear how God is inviting us personally into what God is doing in our community or wants to do here at BUMC.

And through Eli and Samuel interacting, we see how discerning God's voice, listening for God's voice is not an individualistic pursuit. It takes patience, trial and error, and talking and being open to all generations to hear God.

In this story, we have an example of how both the older generations can mentor and raise up younger generations to listen for God's voice (v. 8-10). And is an example of how God can speak to and through those who are younger or less experienced (v.11-14).

Speaking to our kids for a moment. Kids, we know you are on your own journeys with God. We know you are often spiritually hungry, you have questions, and are seeking truth.

Is anyone 11, 12, or 13 here? Samuel was maybe 12 when God called him.

Are you ready for God to speak to you?

Do you believe God wants to talk to you?

Ask Him.

And then get ready.

Another main theme in this story is about naming hard truths. This story tells us how younger generations may see truths or injustices that older generations or those who are "in the system"…meaning the church, might miss.

Of course, this does not *always* mean that younger generations are "right" in areas of disagreement. But we must respect their perspective and listen to God with them.

The younger generations do challenge systems. And the older generations then often feel dismissed and so very tired.

That's why we need this story…to see and embrace the humility of Eli, to see and embrace the courage of Samuel, to see and embrace the work of God pulling the generations together.

But the next generation often carries the weight of voicing the transitions that are to come. Samuel did not have an easy word to deliver to Eli. Yet, this word of judgement shapes Samuel's leadership as a future judge of Israel.

One modern day example, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke hard truths to his generation. Dr. King wrote letters from a Birmingham jail that included elements of judgement and prophecy to share "hard truths" that would shape generations to come.

Like Samuel, he spoke a word that people did not want to hear. Like Eli, the church must decide in every generation, "Will we resist it… or receive it?"

Or are we too cool to be schooled?

How can the church empower young and old to speak those hard truths AND be willing to receive those truths?

And then let's touch briefly on the theme of humility. By now we can see that our wisdom grows when generations listen to one another.

But I am not a big fan of exactly how Eli urges Samuel to tell him what God has said. In verse 17 we read,

17 "What was it he said to you?" Eli asked. "Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you."

In doing so, Eli shows humility toward God, if maybe not displaying much emotional maturity toward Sameul.

But Eli receives Samuel's hard word. He doesn't defend himself, or argue, or dismiss Samuel. He basically says, "Let God do what God is going to do."

Most people are willing to speak hard truths. Far fewer are willing to receive it.

One scholar said not much of theological importance happens in this story.

He is so wrong!

It is here that we learn that God is looking for someone to talk to. God is always calling us into relationship.

And so, the theological question becomes not whether God is speaking. The question is whether we are listening? Are we willing to open ourselves to God and to one another, to listen with humility and courage?

Who is your Samuel—the voice you may be tempted to dismiss?

Who is your Eli—the person you need the courage to speak to?

As we move into a time of reflection, let's practice that same humility of heart that Eli taught Samuel. Let's lift up to God, in the quiet of our own hearts, **'Speak, Lord…for your servants are listening.'"**