

*“Famished for a Word”*  
*Part II in the series, God Calling*  
*1 Samuel 3:1-20*  
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“In those days the word of the Lord was rare.” The Bible isn’t always strange to modern times, although maybe I’m jumping to conclusions on this. It could be that some of us hear a word from the Lord more often than I do. Not that I don’t think God speaks; not that I’m not trying to listen. It’s just that it doesn’t seem very often, that I hear a clearly discernable, easily verifiable word of God.

Maybe that’s strange for a preacher to say. Here I am, standing in the preaching tradition of Reformation thinking like that of the Second Helvetic Confession that says, “the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God” and this word from 1 Samuel about the rarity of the word of the Lord in those days begs honesty of me in these: it’s not that often--really, I don’t know if it’s ever been--that I have heard a word of God so clearly that I could write words down on paper and say, “Now those words are precisely the words God is saying. From God’s lips to mine, thus saith the Lord.” The word of the Lord feels more rare than that.

Not that God isn’t speaking. See, isn’t that just the thing? We believe in a God who speaks. A God who spoke creation into existence, spoke covenant to Abraham, spoke God’s name to Moses, spoke truth through Isaiah, spoke parables through Jesus, spoke visions to John on the island of Patmos. Our God is no one if not a speaking God. So why is it that people don’t line up outside my study door to tell me what God has been saying to them? I don’t think I’m alone in believing that even though God does speak to us, it can be hard to hear what God is saying.

When people come saying, “Pastor, I’d like to talk,” it’s not usually because they’ve heard from God as though across the dining room table. More often, it’s because they wish God’s speech would be so plain. But as it is, their ears hurt from straining for the voice. Even those who dig in Scripture can feel that a word of God specifically fitting to the conundrums of their life is as rare as a 5-karat diamond.

Not that Scripture isn’t the Word of the Lord and God doesn’t speak through it. It’s just that the kind of word we crave isn’t just, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” which is as true a word of God as we will ever hear. But what does it mean for me to love that neighbor, the one who so gets under my skin I feel like I could yell in his face so hard it would just blast his face right off. Lord, speak a word to me about what loving that person actually looks like; a word I know has my name on it, a word clearly about my life.

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Let me share a bit from my life. A little more than three years ago I had a chance to accept a call as pastor of a church, and I declined it. For 5 years I’d been serving the Parkville, MO congregation from which I just came. A church the next state over from here began talks with me about my serving as their head-of-staff. I went out on my own to visit and preach, and then our whole family went out. We loved the people. It would have been a beautiful place to live, a great town for raising kids. The Pastor Nominating Committee extended the offer that I should be their candidate for pastor, and four days later I turned it down.

I guess the plainest way to say why is that Heather and I discerned a word from God that this was not a call from the Lord. But let me tell you what kind of word of God it wasn’t. As we prayed, God didn’t speak so audibly that, had a tape recorder been running, it would have picked up God’s voice. As I sat with Scripture no text glowed like neon, instructing us not to make the move. As I spoke with others--with Heather, family, people I trust--none spoke prophet-style, “Thus saith the Lord, ‘Do not accept that call.’” I believe God did speak a word that was faithful to lead us and that we did hear it. But it felt rare, as in undercooked: not nearly as firm as I’d have preferred.

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The word of the Lord was rare in the days. It was a hard time for Israel. They were threatened from the outside by Philistine invaders, while inside wars between tribes had Israel in danger of breaking apart. Religion was corrupt--the sons of Eli the priest were sleeping with women who served in the house of God and using the sacrifice system to serve their own ends. Overall, the last line of the book of Judges summed things up rather well: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." Maybe God's word wasn't heard because no one cared to listen.

But then there was Samuel. Samuel was God's gift to his mother Hannah who had been childless but desperately prayerful that God would give her a son. Hannah's petitions received no word of answer from the Lord, but rather a little soul who formed in her womb whom she bore and named Samuel. "If you give your servant a son," she had prayed, "I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life," which she did. And so Samuel lived and grew up with Eli in the Lord's house in Shiloh. With Eli's checkered parenting record and failing literal, and perhaps spiritual, vision, it seems Samuel deserved better for a surrogate father and spiritual guide.

But one night, in the small hours, Eli received an awakening. Samuel's sleep heavy feet shuffled into Eli's room there in the house of God.

"I'm here!" the boy said. "You called?" Eli groaned and stirred in his blankets.

"No, I didn't call," said his groggy voice. "Go back to bed."

But soon the boy was back. "I'm here. You called?" Samuel said.

"No I didn't," said Eli, perhaps a little bit grumpy now. "Go back to bed."

But still, the boy returned. "I'm here. You called me?" And something struck Eli. The little bit of spiritual vision he had left told him that God was afoot. Perhaps the hairs stood up on his arms and neck, and his skin began to tingle in a moment of realization that a voice, and a presence were there in the house.

Eli's voice wasn't thick with sleep any more. He said, "Go! Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening.'"

So Samuel went back to bed and lay amid the torch cast shadows of God's house. And the Lord came and stood there, calling as before.

"Samuel! Samuel," the word of the Lord commanding Samuel's attention. It was the rare speech of God, for voice Samuel hadn't known before: as the text says, "Samuel did not yet know the Lord."

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At issue with Samuel's hearing of God, was not just the audibility of the voice but the *knowing* of the one who spoke. The noise of the voice did a fine job of reaching Samuel's ears--three times he left his room, convinced he was being called. It was the *knowing*, the *discerning*, the *appropriate responding* to the call that so puzzled the boy.

Perhaps this puzzle is familiar even to those who do say they know the Lord. It's one thing to profess with the mouth, "Jesus is Lord and Savior," and quite another to live attentively to how Jesus is moving and speaking among us. It's one thing to believe with the head in "One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit," and quite another to know with the heart what it is to live in communion with this God. It's one thing to call Scripture holy and quite another to receive the life-shaping word God speaks through its pages.

"Speak, your servant is listening," said Samuel, just as Eli instructed.

Despite his bumbling as a dad, and his failed leadership as a priest, Eli's counsel was good when it came to Samuel's knowing God. God is known best by listening. To which we could say, "End of sermon. That's the word, you church. Listen to God like Samuel." But then, we've said hearing a word from God that takes up the intricacies of our lives defies simplistic injunctions like, "Listen to God."

The story of Samuel and Eli gives us a lesson in how to listen for God's voice. It suggests our discernment of God's word for our lives, for our church, requires more ears than just two. To hear God's word to them that day, Samuel and Eli needed each other. Samuel needed Eli to say, essentially, "Boy, that's the Lord calling you!" And Eli needed Samuel to deliver the word God was speaking to him.

It was a hard message Eli heard from the lips of Samuel, a decree of God's judgment on Eli's house. It was a terrible word. Eli surely lamented this word of God's judgment on his family, yet I wonder if he wasn't relieved as well that God was still speaking. That God's lamp hadn't gone out, and would not, as it burned in Samuel now.

To hear the word God spoke that night and morning four ears and two mouths were required. They needed each other to receive God's word, these two, Samuel and Eli the priest. God chose not to speak to the one without using the ears and mouth of the other. Which leads me to wonder if the word of the Lord does not stand closer to us than we think?

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It seem I shouldn't continue as pastor much longer without sharing a bit how I discerned God's voice in this call to Christ Church. In the course of my talks with the search committee I spent time with scripture and in prayer. On walks and runs I voiced questions to God. In the end, God's voice in response didn't sound like Bible-speak. Not like James Earl Jones, Whoopi Goldberg, or George Burns. It was a lot more familiar than that.

I heard God through a search committee member who said, "Matt, you seem to have some qualities our church needs in a pastor right now." God spoke through long-time spiritual guide who said, "Matt, when you talk about this church there is a different light in your eyes." God sounded in the voice of a friend who said, "Matt, if this call came unexpectedly, there's a good chance the Lord is in it."

The word God speaks is often hidden in the words of people close to us. Like when men of the church gather Wednesday mornings not only to read Scripture, but also to talk on life. Maybe we'd hear God more readily if we opened our lives to each other more. On Tuesday the session will meet to discern God's leading of God for this church, and it's only as they attend to one another that God's voice will be heard. God's Spirit lives in each of us, so each of our mouths may help shape the word God is speaking into our lives. It's into the noisy, dusty, confusing spaces of life that God's voice sounds. The Word became flesh, after all, and *flesh* remains God's way of speaking.

Much of our hearing of God involves listening to each other. Just as God joined an old priest and a boy to make God's voice known and get God's way lived, I won't hear God's word in my life if I choose not to listen to you. You have the Spirit, and God will surely make you my preacher. I suppose this is God's wisdom in preaching, that we don't all just sit in a sanctuary and read the Bible for half an hour, but rather, that we attend to a fleshy servant of the Word whose words somehow, in the Spirit's power, become the word of God for us.

Come in close, come in close and speak, we sang in our prayer for illumination. God's word among us may be closer than we think. Even as close as the heart of each to whom I speak; even as familiar as each mouth that speaks to me.

Let us pray.

Speak, Lord. Your servants are listening.  
Grant us ears to hear your Word from out of Scripture's page;  
help us to hear word still takes flesh  
in our sisters and brothers,  
every voice you make a serve the Word that leads us to life.  
Speak, Lord. Your servants are listening. Amen.