**14th September 2014**

**1 Samuel 3**

This is a well known and well loved story of Samuel the boy hearing God speak to him in the night. There are three things about this story. There is listening. There is hearing. There is a new beginning.

First of all there is listening.

Three times, Samuel wakes up in the night to the sound of a voice calling his name. [[1]](#endnote-1)Three times he scrambles to the place where Eli sleeps, sure that the blind old priest is calling him. But the first time, and then the second, Eli says, “I didn’t call you, my son! Lie down again!”

Both times, Samuel lies down, bewildered.

The voice calls his name a third time. Does Samuel hesitate a little before shaking the old man awake? The text doesn’t say---but this time Eli starts out of

sleep, alert, watchful, a brightness igniting his half-blind eyes that Samuel has never seen there before: “Samuel, *it is the Lord*.... if the voice comes again, this is what you should do...” And Samuel lies down, too tense to sleep, and waits.

There’s a story about a businessman who needed several million pounds to clinch an important deal and sensing the need for divine help, he went to church to pray for money.   
By chance, he knelt next to a man who was praying for £100

to pay an urgent debt. The businessman took out his wallet and pressed £100 into the other man’s hand and, overjoyed, the man got up and left the church.   
The businessman then closed his eyes and prayed, "Right, Lord. Now that I have your undivided attention...."[[2]](#endnote-2)  
  
That businessman wanted God’s undivided attention. But more often than not it isn’t God who has the problem … it’s us. We really don’t have to work that hard to get God to hear our prayers. He’s promised He would listen. Jesus even promised “ask and it shall be given you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened.”   
We don’t have to work at getting HIS attention…. but too often God has to work to get ours.  
  
I read recently that some state in the US was thinking of making new restrictions on young drivers. It seems that having a teenager driver can be a scary thing. But they’ve found that when a teen has a friend in the car, the situation gets even worse. AND if that teen has several friends in the car… that was a recipe for disaster.  
So someone has suggested that for the first year or so driving – no friends in the car.  
Now, why would a teen be a danger because of his friends being in the car with him? Because the teen would get distracted by his friends and not pay attention.  
They have ears to hear… but they’d just not be listening to the things they need to listen to.  
  
This story suggests that the presence of God isn’t obvious, like a big flashing sign on the High Street. It’s possible to confuse God’s overtures to us with other things. When God speaks, it might sound at first like the sighing of the wind or the creaking of a hinge. It might sound like the old man in the next room. Samuel and Eli have to consult to figure it out.... which isn’t all that different from what we gather here to do every Sunday morning. In small groups, like the housegroups, we can help one another to listen for God. Samuel’s God is a God who draws near, as near as our own flesh and blood and breath, in the midnight hour. How can we listen for God?

But listening also involves hearing. I read about a high school music appreciation class where the students were asked the difference between listening and hearing. It took a while for anybody to raise their hand, but eventually one of them did they gave this insightful definition:  
“Listening is WANTING to hear.”

The death of the Revd Ian Paisley has brought many reactions and reflections. I remember when I was young watching Paisley bluster n the TV news, never , never , never, Ulster says no…. I remember saying to my father is that man a Reverend?’ I couldn’t quite square a church minster with someone who seemed to shout at other people all the time and who wasn’t prepared to listen to and hear what his enemies had to say. As history turned out Dr No became Dr Yes and Paisley would eventually lead Northern Ireland into a devolved assembly and bring a measure of peace to that troubled country. We can only pray that his legacy is not squandered by people refusing to listen to each other again.

The debate over the Scottish referendum has been acrimonious at times. We can only hope that the people will have listened hard to all sides as they come to make their decision on Thursday. It will be close and divisive and there will need to be a desire to listen and seek reconciliation and attend to the healing of the nation whatever the result on Thursday.

Now, as we come to I Samuel – we find that somebody hasn’t been paying attention.  
Somebody has NOT been LISTENING to God.  
And that someone is the priest of Israel = Eli.  
  
In chapter two God explains what’s been happening (turn to I Samuel 2:13-17) “Eli’s sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD. They are stealing the consecrated meat that had been set aside for God’s use. It is a serious offence. Are we depriving God of gifts that should be set aside for his work? To compound that they are sleeping with prostitutes in the holy places further disrespecting God.  
So, Eli takes his boys aside and gives them a good talking to.  
But he DOES NOT discipline them.   
He doesn’t remove them from their office as he should have.  
  
These are his boys. And he gets distracted by this love for his sons. He loves them more than he does God.   
Eli loved his sons more than God.  
They kept him from listening to God.  
They distracted him from his responsibility before God.  
And because Eli loved his sons as much as he did, he stopped listening to God, and so in 1Samuel 2:35 God tells Eli   
“I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his house, and he will minister before my anointed one always.”   
  
God had selected Samuel to replace Eli and his family because Samuel would be a priest who would not get distracted by anything.   
Samuel would be a priest who would LISTEN to God  
And that LISTENING began right here in I Samuel 3  
  
God wakes Samuel four separate times  
Each time God calls - “Samuel, Samuel”   
And the first 3 times… that’s all God says.  
It’s only after Samuel (following Eli’s advice) says ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening" that God starts talking to him.  
It’s only after Samuel declares I’m not only listening I am hearing too..  
God had looked for a man who would listen to Him  
God was looking for a man who wanted to hear what He had to say.

The church’s tendency, especially in our time, has been to domesticate this story of Samuel’s first encounter with God– we turn the story into no more than a story about intimate encounter with God. We may miss the story’s real good news it has to tell us. The call of Samuel is about more than personal devotion or the rewards of quiet one-on-one time with God. This story’s message for the Church in troubled times is this: *At a low point in the religious and social life of Israel, God’s word to and through Samuel was not a word of personal consolation but of social*

*transformation*. This would be a new beginning.

In verse 1 of chapter three we are told that in those days the word of the Lord was rarely heard and there was no outpouring of vision.

The word of the Lord was rarely heard.

Who was listening for the word from the Lord. Who was speaking the word of the Lord. Samuel is listening now. Samuel hears a word from the Lord. That word is a word of judgement. The Lord says Eli and his household will be judged. He will no longer be the priest of the Lord.

Often we think the word of the Lord should be a word of consolation, of comfort. In difficult times a word of personal consolation is *precisely* what we want to hear, not an analysis of social ills or oracles of judgment.

A lot of popular religion today majors in heart-warming, touching stories and strategies for better personal adjustment. The pastor of one megachurch, asked by a researcher why he preached about setting priorities, improving your marriage, or getting along better with your co-workers, but never touched on public, social issues, said he didn’t speak about social issues because it made people uncomfortable; and, he said, “‘people don’t come to church to feel uncomfortable.’”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Without a doubt, there is a time and a place in troubled times for the word of consolation. Our God is a God who knows our condition. God is our refuge and strength, says the Psalmist, a very present help in time of trouble.

There comes a time when the word of personal consolation is not enough; real hope depends on God’s word of social transformation.

The Christian Gospel is good news, yes---a word of hope; but hope is empty unless the obstacles between present reality and God’s future are challenged and removed. Ask any person who has been the victim of oppression or abuse whether there is any hope without judgment, any chance for a different future without changing present conditions. As harsh as the message that Samuel heard may sound, it was a necessary word if the suffering of society’s most vulnerable in his place and time was going to stop. A new beginning is being brought about by God. Which also means a terrible ending. The power and authority that belonged to Eli has been transferred to Samuel. New leadership has come forward. This passage is about the transfer of power. Samuel is now the one who listens for the word of the Lord not Eli. Eli lost the plot. There is therefore the need for a change in leadership.

When today’s Scripture reading observes that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days, and there was no frequent vision,” we can relate. Could there be a better description of the dispirited state of much of the mainline Protestant church today? No one seems to be able to agree what the divine word *is* for our time. On good days, vision for the future from inside or outside the church seems unpromising at best. The lamp of God in the church has not gone out, but in many places it seems to be sputtering and weak.

Maybe the best we can do is to listen harder for what God is saying here and then have the courage to speak up, like Samuel, when morning comes.

Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr, said:

“If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause people everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, if it will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and truth....People far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travellers at midnight.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Whatever God is saying to you, make up your mind to say “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening!”

1. First Presbyterian Church, NYC, January 15, 2006, The Rev. Dr. Sally A. Brown, Asst Professor of Preaching and Worship, Princeton Seminary [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/listen-to-me-jeff-strite-sermon-on-learning-135258.asp?Page=1 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Sally Morgenthaler. *Worship Evangelism* 1st ed. (Zondervan, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Martin Luther King, Jr. “A Knock at Midnight,” *Strength to Love* (Fortress,1963) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)