

LISTENING FOR GOD

a sermon by

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Bon Air Presbyterian Church, Richmond, Virginia

July 30, 2000

Texts: Matthew 9:9-13 I Samuel 3:1-10

In one of his classic comedy routines Bill Cosby imagines how the conversation went between GOD and NOAH when the Lord commanded him to build the ark. God speaks and Noah responds to the voice with disbelief.

In the real world of the Bible, the situation was very different. The ancients perceived God in the wind, heard God speaking in thunder, saw God in lightning, and felt God's presence in an earthquake. God said "Let there be light" and there WAS light. God spoke and the people received his Ten Commandments. God called, and prophets were chosen. Even little boys like Samuel.

Children love the story about God speaking in the night to a young boy. But the line in the Samuel and Eli story which best describes our experience says, **The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."**

We yearn for God's word to us, but we do not hear it. We believe God spoke to the prophets of old, to Samuel, to the disciples, and maybe even to holy people in the present. But we find it hard to believe God speaks to US.

An older man with hearing loss purchased a new state-of-the-art hearing aid and boasted to a friend about its technological superiority. The friend was impressed, and asked, "What kind is it?" The first man replied, "Oh, about 2:30". (LecAid 2:1:6) When God speaks, we don't hear any better.

In the days of Samuel the Bible says the **"word of the Lord was rare"**. God's word may be just as rare today, but it is not for lack of willing voices. Everywhere we turn there are persons prepared to deliver with certainty some version of "the word of the Lord". And I am not even talking about the TV evangelists and church leaders and would-be prophets who lay claim to God's word. In this era of self-expression and self-definition, "What God says to ME" and "What I think the Bible says" are the only criteria for discerning the word of the Lord. As the Bible says about the days of Samuel, we live in a time in which men and women are laws unto themselves.

There is no shortage of words of the Lord. Yet the word of the Lord which rings truest and clearest are the simple words of Jesus to the tax collector Matthew, **"Follow me."**

And like that simple word to Matthew, the word of the Lord usually has a sharp edge to it: it demands something, everything from us. When we learned the story of Samuel and Eli, the part we likely didn't learn is what God actually SAID to Samuel after he finally got his attention: that his beloved Eli's sons were corrupt leaders and would have to die.

Maybe the word of the Lord is rare because when God DOES speak we don't like what God has to say.

So we trap ourselves into a little box. We YEARN for God's word, but we are reluctant, even afraid of what the word might be. We want to experience the presence of God within our lives. We NEED to listen for God. We just don't know how and what to do with that word.

We hear what we WANT to hear. In one of Bill Keane's *Family Circus* cartoons, the children are out playing in the yard, running, screaming, dogs barking, horns blowing. Inside the house, the mother says to her husband, **"Listen! PJ is crying!"** We hear what we believe is important to hear.

A couple, concerned about their 13-year-old daughter's behavior, brought her to see the pastor. Her grades were failing and she had a bad attitude. The pastor talked with the girl and discovered that her bitterness and resentment flowed from her sense of NEVER BEING HEARD BY HER PARENTS. The pastor brought the parents back into the room and offered to pray with them for a harmonious household, but only on one condition. The parents were reticent, but asked the condition: **"For the next 30 days,"** the pastor said, **"your daughter can say anything she wants to say and anyway she wants to say it. YOU CAN ONLY LISTEN TO HER."**

"That's impossible!" the father said. **"It is not impossible,"** the pastor countered, **"It is simply a question of whether or not you desire a change in your home."** At last, the parents agreed and the 4 of them prayed.

The parents worked at it, but it took a while for them to catch on. After 3 weeks, the daughter said, **"Well, I have said everything I have to say. What do you want to say to me?"** The parents reached out and hugged their daughter and told her they loved her. When the family came back to the pastor, the father said, **"It turned out that in finally keeping quiet and listening instead of always talking, we began to hear the voice of God speaking healing words for us."** (LecAid 2:1:8) We can only hear God speaking to us if we stop talking and start listening.

GOD SPEAKS TO US IN VARIOUS WAYS. Many ways. In George Bernard Shaw's play *St. Joan*, Robert asks Joan of Arc about the divine voices she hears: Joan replies, "I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God." "They come from your imagination," Robert replies. "Of course," says Joan. *That is how the messages of God come to us.* Most of us do not hear God calling to us in the night! We are more likely to hear God speaking through an Eli, an older or trusted friend, a pastor or a teacher or a counselor or a spouse. Sometimes God speaks through events in our lives. Sometimes God speaks to us through doors that open us to new opportunities, and sometimes God speaks through doors closing in our faces. Sometimes God even speaks to us through tragedies or the gross catastrophes and losses and pains of human life. God speaks in many ways - but we have to be LISTENING to hear that word - wherever and however it comes to us.

God speaks in many and various ways, but **GOD SPEAKS WITH GREATEST CLARITY IN THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF JESUS.** Our life experiences are important, and certainly they focus our vision and understanding of what Jesus said and did. So also the witness of the church gives clarity to what God reveals to the community of faith. But if we want to hear God speaking to US, (you and me) we need to hear what JESUS SAYS to US: not what Jesus says to OTHER PEOPLE, not what Jesus said OTHER people had to do to enter the kingdom, but *what does Jesus say I have to do?* What does God expect OUT OF ME? **"Go and learn what this means,"** Jesus says, **"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."** Loving-kindness, not prejudice. Acceptance, not judgement. Not recitation of law or creed or ritual, but personal obedience.

Of course hearing God speak means nothing if a response doesn't follow. For **RESPONDING and ACTING on the word of God spells the difference between merely HEARING GOD and LISTENING TO GOD.** How often have we KNOWN the right thing to do, but have failed to do it!? How often have we walked away from joy or peace or personal fulfillment - when it is presented to us? How often have we HEARD God speaking to us, but NOT LISTENED to that word?

On December 9, 1902, on Mt Desert Rock off the coast of Maine, a young lighthouse assistant awakened the lighthouse keeper to tell him that he thought he heard a steamboat whistle nearby. The two of them went out into the bitter cold and saw, on the tip of a rock ledge, what appeared to be a wrecked boat. The two men took a rope and fought their way through the icy wind until they saw a tugboat with several men aboard pinned to the rock. It took several attempts, but at last they reached the boat, and despite the frigid conditions, pulled 18 men to safety. Had the young assistant keeper not heard the whistle in the night, some of the crewmen might have perished, for the boat sank shortly after the last man was rescued.

Afterwards, as the survivors warmed up and talked about their ordeal, they marveled that their distress whistle could even have been heard over the howling wind and pounding waves. One of the seamen remarked, **"That whistle was the voice of God; and thankfully, someone heard it."** (LecAid ibid.)

God speaks to us. And when you hear that word, it brings comfort, solace, strength, guidance, courage, and wisdom. God speaks to YOU. And when you hear that word, when you LISTEN to that word, when you RESPOND to that word, you have in your hands a strong rope to lead you over the most troubled waters. For God's word is the word of life. This is the word of the Lord! AMEN.

I Samuel 3:1-10

¹Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. ⁴Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!"^e and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Matthew 9:9-13

⁹As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

¹⁰And as he sat at dinner^ε in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting^ε with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹²But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”