

“Your Servant is Listening”

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Continuing a series *A King for God's People*

1st Samuel 3:1-4:1

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Before we hear the Scripture, let me tell you about two parents. They are not parents together. One's named Hannah. She had struggled with infertility and the burden of people's judgements. She had yearned to become a mom. Finally, she birthed a son. She named him Samuel. That means "God Heard." He was a sign to her that God heard her prayers.¹

The other parent is Eli. He is the high priest of God, serving in God's House. (In those days it was a tent, called The Tabernacle, that was the focus of Israel's life with God. Later, the Temple would replace it.)

Eli has two grown sons, who are priests like him. They are disasters. They use their positions and power to steal and abuse.² Eli knows what they were doing, tells them to stop, but does nothing more to protect the people. You will see that God holds Eli responsible.

These two parents, Hannah and Eli, first crossed paths when Hannah came to pray for a child. A few years later, Hannah came back to God's House, with her toddler. She left him there. She'd promised God that she would give her child back, to a life dedicated to God. So she left him with Eli, to learn service in God's House. Let's hope Eli has more success as a parent this time!³

Jump ahead a few years. Samuel has been growing, walking larger in the ways of God.⁴

Now, let's hear God's Word.

The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.

One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am." And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

¹ The story of Hannah begins in 1st Samuel 1:1-20.

² 2:22-25.

³ 1:21-2:11; 2:18-20. Hannah had a total of four or five children.

⁴ 2:21, 26; 3:19.

Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

A third time the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told 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." And the Lord said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.'"

Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the Lord. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, but Eli called him and said, "Samuel, my son." Samuel answered, "Here I am." "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." So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, "He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes."

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.

And Samuel's word came to all Israel.

1st Samuel 3:1-4:1a (NIV)

II

"Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening."

Samuel's mom named him "God Heard." Now *God Heard* heard God. How did God call to Samuel? With a shout? A whisper? It must have sounded normal enough for Samuel to mistake it for Eli's voice.

I've never heard God's voice. Rabbi Burt Visotsky said, ". . . *I'm a praying Jew, so I talk to God all the time, but I don't usually hear answers. . . . If I hear God at all, it's*

*somewhere between the lines of a page I've been studying for hours when I am reading Torah, and all I ever hear is, 'Burt, turn the page.'"*⁵

I've never even heard that. Or, maybe I have heard God's voice, but thought it was someone else.

"Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening." But, can we hear?

More than the hearing part in this story, I am struck by the seeing.

It begins with this ominous observation: visions of God were rare. Those were hard days for God's People. Some of you will remember that in July we looked at the strange story of God's Ark being captured. Today's story comes just before that. (I'm doing things a bit out of order.) Israel's position was precarious, insecure and conflicted. There was chaos and disorder. So those with power did what they wanted. Everyone else — women especially — suffered.

Is this why "there were not many visions" of the Lord? Or, did people not see what God was showing them?

"Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening." But, can we hear?

We are told that Eli's eyes were weak. Age was catching him. Why give this detail? Does it signal that even those devoted to God were not seeing straight? Which, clearly, Eli was not. Look at his sons' behaviour.

We are told *"the lamp of God had not yet gone out"* in God's House that night. Another detail that might not matter? Or, is it a signal of hope? God has not left things completely dark.

It calls Samuel's experience a "vision."⁶ But he does not see anything. He just hears. Maybe what he hears helps him to see. God says, *"See! I am about to do something!..."*

III

"Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening." But, can we hear?

In the unfolding history of God's work with God's People, this episode marks a turning point.⁷ We start with Samuel entirely dependent on Eli. We finish with Eli entirely

⁵ Quoted in a sermon by William Carl. http://day1.org/1119-having_trouble_sleeping_through_the_night

⁶ *Mar'ah* (vision) derives from the word meaning "to see."

⁷ Walter Brueggemann wrote, "The entire narrative . . . prepares us for the new venture of faith and politics for which Samuel will provide the crucial leadership. That leadership, however, is fully to the service of and obedient to the purposes of Yahweh, who now wills a sharp turn in the shape and destiny of Israel. For theological exposition, it is this fresh authorization of Samuel that is the crucial issue." First and

dependent on Samuel.⁸ The torch of spiritual leadership passes. Actually, God confiscates the torch from Eli's hands that kept dropping it, that nearly let the flame go out. God gives the torch into the small hands of Samuel.

Samuel had never thought of carrying it. Samuel did not ask for it. God just did it. This is not about Samuel, you see. It's not about his readiness; he is not ready. It's not about his qualifications; they are not many. It's about God. God chooses to start speaking through Samuel.⁹

I like Eli. He has serious faults. Still, with Samuel he is patient. He sees what is going on. He guides Samuel in what to say and how to hear. *"Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening."* Basically, *"Listen as a servant, ready to do what God says."*

That's a posture we can take. Open to however God might choose to communicate with us. And . . . open to when God chooses not to. *"In those days, visions were rare."* Then, God spoke to Samuel. Was the boy better than all the rest? Not that I can see.

"Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening." But, can we hear?

Listening is one thing. Doing is another. Eli does! So many times he did not. Let's not hold Eli up as a hero. But this time, he does. He hears the hard message God has given. What then does he say? *"He is God. Let him do whatever he thinks best."*¹⁰ Honestly, are we able to say that? Is anyone? All the time? Faithfully, fully trusting in God? Anyone?

IV

"Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening."

There is another boy, a long time after Samuel. His parents lost him, couldn't find him. They'd brought him from their small town. Now, in the city crowds, he was gone. Imagine how they were after three days of looking! Then, they find him, in the Temple *"Jesus!"* Mary and Joseph burst out. *"Why have you done this to us? We've been really worried!"*

And get this! He says, *"Where else would I be? I have to be in my Father's House!"*¹¹

Second Samuel (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), 24.

⁸ Ibid, 25.

⁹ "The narrative takes great care to show that Samuel's credibility does not rest on any conventional political confirmation. Rather, Samuel is presented as having an authorization rooted in nothing other than the freedom and promise of God. Samuel's freshly authorized voice in Israel's public life stands over against all conventional modes of power and brusquely displaces them." Ibid, 27.

¹⁰ *The Message* translation of v. 18.

¹¹ See Luke 2:41-52. Luke says Jesus was 12 years old, on the verge of manhood. 1st Samuel doesn't give us Samuel's age, though the much-later Jewish historian Josephus tells us he was also twelve.

Samuel came to live in God's House, that physical anchor for the experience of God's presence. Jesus is the presence of God, the eternal Son of God the Father, who came to live among us.

Jesus is the One who, because he is God, became a servant.¹² The One by whom, through whom and for whom all things were created, who came among us to serve.¹³ Here is what God said of Jesus, through the prophet Isaiah:

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.¹⁴*

"Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening."

Jesus lived the perfect will of God. Jesus walked the perfect life of God. He is the perfect love of God.

Jesus is the Servant, of God and for us.

With Samuel, and Eli and Hannah, we can say *"Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening."* But, can we hear?

Yes. Listen to him, the Servant. Walk with him, the Servant. Love with him, Jesus the Servant. See with him. Hear with him.

Jesus, your Servant, is listening.

(Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 5, chapter 10, section 4.)

¹² Philippians 2:5-11.

¹³ Colossians 1:16 along with Mark 10:45 and Luke 22:27.

¹⁴ Isaiah 42:1, cited with reference to Jesus in Matthew 12:18.