

“Can You Hear Me Now?”

I Samuel 3:1-21

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His name is Levy Rippy. Do you know what he does? He drives approximately three thousand miles a month asking one question over and over. “Can you hear me now?”

Rippy is the Verizon Wireless technician that gages how well their product works. In addition to testing his company’s products, he also tests the competitors’. Someone in marketing realized this would make a great slogan and commercial, and the rest is history.

“Samuel, can you hear me now?” With a little imagination you can hear God asking this question. It took four attempts for God and Samuel to connect, but when they did, the communication flowed. Let me tell you the story.

Samuel was taken to the temple at Shiloh to live when he was a young boy. This did not happen because his parents abandoned him, but to fulfill a promise made to God by his mother, Hannah. For years, she was unable to have children and prayed that if God would give her a son, she would dedicate him to the Lord’s work. She kept that promise after Samuel was born and at some point in his early life, she allowed him to live in the temple with Eli, the priest.

It appears that Eli received him warmly and was grateful to have him because he was old and feeble, in need of help. Eli’s own sons were no help to him even though they were also priests. They were not only irresponsible but also immoral and corrupt. Eli could not depend upon them to assist him with the daily chores in the temple, much less take care of him.

One night after Eli and Samuel had gone to bed, something startling occurred. Samuel heard someone calling his name and assumed it was Eli. He immediately went to Eli’s bedside and asked what he needed. Eli told Samuel that he had not called him so Samuel went back to his room. The third time this occurred, Eli realized the Lord was calling Samuel and told him if it happened again, to respond by saying, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Samuel did as Eli instructed and the Lord gave Samuel an alarming message. Judgment was coming to Eli’s family because of the contemptible behavior of his two sons, Hophni and Phineas. The consequences of their wicked lifestyles were going to come crashing down upon them.

The next morning, Samuel went about his normal duties reluctant to tell Eli what the Lord said to him the previous night. Eli insisted that Samuel be forthright, so Samuel gave him the bad news. Eli did not appear surprised to hear it for he said, “He is the Lord; let Him do what is good in His eyes.”

Scripture tells us that the Lord continued to speak to Samuel at Shiloh and he became a spokesman for God to all of Israel. He was revered for his role as a prophet, seer and judge.

Historians also tell us that Eli’s sons were killed in a battle with the Philistines soon after Samuel received this message. When Eli heard of their fate, he fell backward, broke his neck and died, too. Judgment swiftly came to Eli’s family.

What are we to make of this story this morning? There is no shortage of lessons it can teach us.

Not all religious people are good people. Be sure your sins will find you out. Violence breeds violence. If you live by the sword, you will die by the sword. God will not be mocked or manipulated to support evil. If you are going to make a difference in the world, you need good listening skills and the ability to speak the truth in love. Don’t underestimate the insight and influence of children.

However, the lesson I wish to develop in this sermon is this. **We need to listen to God.** “Speak, for your servant is listening,” Samuel said. This needs to be our prayer, too.

Are you a good listener? Few people are. Our Western society doesn't place a premium on listening, at least not to the extent of the mystical Eastern culture. Has anyone present today taken a course on listening? If you are not a professional counselor, I doubt it.

We teach people how to drive, cook, dance, arrange flowers, play sports, make money and speak. Learning the art of listening is another matter. I haven't seen that promoted through a church or school curriculum lately. And yet, listening is an important part of discipleship. "Speak, for your servant is listening," Samuel said.

So many things interfere with listening, don't they? We live in a noisy and busy world that doesn't encourage taking time to listen. I wonder what we are missing.

Perhaps this explains the second verse of our text. "In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions." Why was God not talking much? Could it be that no one was listening?

How many times have I heard a disgruntled mate say, "I quit talking because no one was listening?" Maybe God felt that way, too.

If you took the time to listen, what do you think God would say? What did He say to Samuel? It was a heavy message. Eli's family was in great danger brought on by his sons' despicable behavior, and great sorrow and pain were bearing down upon them.

That was a heavy message. I wonder why God spoke to Samuel and not Eli. I think He had spoken to Eli and his boys, but nothing came of it. Hophni and Phineas had no intention of repenting and Eli was unable to rein them in. It was time for God to speak to someone else that would listen and take His message seriously.

What does God want to say to you? I would not presume to know that. Perhaps it is a positive message filled with love and assurance. He wants you to know that He knows your name, where you are and the challenges you are facing. He is aware that you are grieving and need comfort, worried and need peace, struggling with decisions and need guidance, facing intimidating challenges and need confidence, sick and need healing, guilty and need forgiveness.

On the other hand, He may want to keep you and your family from experiencing great sorrow and pain brought on by mistakes. He wants to lead you through some constructive changes.

Could He also have another message for you? Does He want to use you, as He did Samuel, to be His spokesman and proclaim His Word? Is He calling you to be a prophet that warns people of danger or encourages them with hope? Does He need you to speak out against injustice and evil and be an advocate for truth and righteousness?

In every generation, brave individuals have accepted that challenge. Last week, one was laid to rest whose voice will be missed. Foy Valentine was the executive director of the Southern Baptist Convention's former Christian Life Commission from 1960 to 1987.

Jimmy Allen, a lifelong friend and colleague said of Valentine, "He was legitimately a 20th Century prophet. He was a pioneer in Christian ethics, civil rights and religious liberty. He dealt with the hardest kind of issues in a prophetic fashion."

W.C. Fields, longtime director of Baptist Press described Valentine as the most significant civil-rights leader among Southern Baptists during the 1960's, 70's and 80's. "During those dark days when civil rights was such an explosive issue, Valentine was always well-informed and sure of the Christian approach, which was grounded in his love for and understanding of scripture. He had the courage to follow through on his convictions. His courage was amazing," Fields wrote.

How appropriate that we pay tribute to Valentine today on the weekend we celebrate the life and legacy of another 20th Century prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr. He, too, listened to God and became a courageous spokesman for civil rights, equality and peace in a broken world.

Would your life and our world be better if you took more time to listen to God? Thomas Merton certainly thinks it would. Before his untimely death in 1968, Merton was one of

the strongest proponents of meditation and prayer, which he referred to as the “watchful listening of the heart.” He continues to speak through his book, Contemplative Prayer.

Merton believed that “nothing could more directly redeem the times, restore the sense of the divine image that lives in each human being and lift the inward and outward sense of responsibility of men and women for each other than a rekindling of the deepest ranges of prayer.”

What do you need to do to enhance your prayer life, the “watchful listening of your heart?” What steps do you need to take to be a better listener? Think about it this week and begin that process.

“Can you hear me now?” I pray this week you can say yes to God if He asks.