

1 Samuel 3:1-10

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 temple 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." 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. 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. The Lord called Samuel a third time, 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."

Most of you heard of Mark Twain and know he was a writer who could communicate insights in a way which won him many admirers. He was welcomed in the highest social and literary circles both in this country and abroad. On one of his trips abroad the Chancellor of Germany sent an invitation for him to come to the palace to dine with the royal family. When Mark Twain's little daughter heard about the invitation, she exclaimed, "Daddy, you know most everybody in the whole world now, don't you . . . that is, except God?" Ouch!

This morning's passage contains an invitation for us to hear and know God's voice, but first let's recap how we got here. There was a man named Elkanah who had two wives. The wives were named Hannah and Peninah. Now Peninah had children, but Hannah had none, which was cause for a lot of friction between these two women. In those days, women were valued primarily for their fertility, a barren wife was considered nothing more than a liability, and Peninah never let Hannah forget that she had given Elkanah several children while Hannah had given him none.

Hannah's despair grew over the years until she wept constantly and refused to eat. Elkanah tried to comfort her and reassure her by affirming his love, but he could not fill that sense of emptiness and failure that Hannah felt. Hannah was a deeply religious woman, so it was only natural that she should take her despair to the Lord. At the temple of Shiloh she knelt to pray.

Eli the prophet was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple, and he saw this woman weeping bitterly. Her lips were moving but her voice could not be heard. Eli wrongly concluded that she was intoxicated, and he went over to her and scolded her. Eli could not know the anguish in Hannah's heart, the unspeakable sorrow she felt. She was not intoxicated. She had been making a promise to God that if he would give her a son then she would "*give him to the Lord all the days of his life.*" Now, other mothers have made such promises, but few if any were as sincere as Hannah. She explained her situation to Eli, and he granted her his blessing. "*Go in peace, and the God of Israel will grant your petition which you have made to Him.*"

This was how young Samuel came into the world, as an answer to a devout woman's prayer. When he was only three years old his mother brought him to the temple and left him with the prophet Eli to raise as his own son in the sacred shrine in Shiloh. Once a year Hannah would go to see her son and bring him a robe that she had sewn for him with love and devotion. By the way, after that first hurdle was cleared, Hannah had several other children. We've all seen that happen, children born after parents told they would have no children? But her firstborn she gave to God just as she promised.

I hope you will want to read this story for yourselves, I just wanted to refresh your memory and set the scene concerning this critical evening in Samuel's life when he first became conscious of God's presence in his life.

Can you remember that moment in your own life, when God became real for you? For some, it occurred as a child or as a young teen. It may have been in a church service, or on a youth outing, or sitting around a campfire or on a mountaintop, but at some point hopefully God spoke to each one of us, and at that moment we knew that God was real.

Samuel was still a boy. He was lying down in his little cubicle in the temple. The lamp of God, as it was called, had not yet gone out, and the Ark of the Covenant was nearby. Suddenly Samuel heard a voice, “*Samuel! Samuel!*” And Samuel answered, “*Here I am,*” and he ran to Eli and he said again, “*I am here.*” But Eli had not called him, and he sent Samuel back to bed. Eli probably thought something had frightened the young boy. So Samuel lay down in his bed again. But a second time the voice called, “*Samuel.*” And again he rushed to Eli’s bed. And again Eli sent him back. At this point the writer of the book of Samuel adds in **verse 7** that “*Samuel did not yet know the Lord and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.*” You can almost feel the anticipation here: A remarkable thing is getting ready to happen in Samuel’s life! It’s the same remarkable experience to which you and I are invited to this morning.

Then for a third time Samuel heard the voice and, for a third time, he ran to Eli. But this time Eli understands what is happening: it is the voice of the Lord speaking to Samuel. Eli then say’s in **verse 9**

“*Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’*” And God does speak to Samuel — words that will forever change Samuel's life.

I pray you came to this *sacred place* this morning with the intention that you too might hear God speak to your life. If not why did you come here? Out of habit? Out of loyalty? Out of guilt? Well, I am thankful that you are here, whatever the motivation, but I pray you came with an expectation that this could be a life-changing experience for you. This sometimes happens in worship. People who have been blind are made to see both physically and spiritually. People who are living in darkness are able to see a light, and people who have known nothing but defeat suddenly achieve a great victory. By God's grace they finally conquer themselves. It can happen and does.

But there are some things which must be present in our lives if we are to come to know God in the same way Samuel did. We must have a true believing. Theologians talk about a “*leap of faith.*”

Believing in God and trusting in His promises without qualification is not as easy as some people make it appear. A “*leap of faith*” is sometimes hard, it’s scary, and sometimes looks even foolish. That’s why it’s called faith!

Certainly life can make us cynical. Jesus knew it was easier for little children to experience the kingdom than for us educated mature and often shell-shocked adults. Our lives have become encrusted with layers and layers of negative experiences, self-serving rationalizations, and unrealized expectations. So the boy Samuel was at a stage in life when he was more open to God’s leading than perhaps he would be later. And that truth has a lot to say about the importance of our ministries to children and youth in our church. Still, none of us are too old to believe. Faith is simply a matter of letting go of everything and letting God.

A man descended into a deep well by sliding down a rope which was supposed to be of ample length. But to his dismay he came to the end of the rope before his feet had touched the bottom. He didn’t have enough strength left to climb up again, and to let go would seemingly kill him in the unseen depths below.

He held on until his strength was utterly exhausted, and then he let go and dropped, he thought, to his death. But he fell just three feet, and found himself safe on the bottom.

Many of us are in that same predicament today: we are just three feet, some just three inches from trusting God, but we're afraid, more to the point terrified of letting go. Many are using all of their strength and all their energies to cling to traditions, doubts and fears. Before we can hear God speak to our lives, before we can know Him as our closest friend and dearest companion, before He can become real to us, as real as He was to young Samuel, we must let go and fully open our minds, our ears, and our hearts to God.

A believing heart is the first step we must take if we would know God. The second thing we must have is a listening ear. If the old saying is true that the walls have ears, it is also true that sometimes the ears have walls. Eli advised young Samuel to lie down and listen.

There is a story told of a young man in the great depression who saw a "help wanted" ad in the newspaper for a telegraph operator. He had studied Morse Code at home while he was unemployed, but he had no experience, and his heart sank as he joined a roomful of other men

seeking the same job. He found a chair and sank into it, already feeling dejected. After only a few minutes, however, his face suddenly brightened up, he jumped up out of his chair and ran into the manager's office. Within a few minutes the manager appeared at the door to announce that the job had been filled.

One of the other men who had been waiting asked with great astonishment, "What did he say that landed him the job? After all, he was the last one to get here." The manager answered: "It was nothing he said. All morning long I have been tapping out a message on my office window in Morse Code. It was loud enough for all of you to hear. The message was this: 'If you can understand this message, come on in. You're hired.' All of you heard the noise. He was the only one who listened and heard the message."

It must be very frustrating for God to speak to people who simply refuse to listen. Since we got up this morning and made our way down to this house of worship, God has been trying to speak to us. Through the beauty of His creation, through the love of family and friends, through the hymns we sang, through the songs we've heard,

through the Scriptures which were read, and yes, even through this sermon. In many different ways, God has been, and is speaking to us, but only a few will really hear.

We need a believing heart, we need listening ears, and finally we need obedient hands. **Verse 10** “*Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears.*” Note those two very important words, “*thy servant.*” I suppose that the reason many of us refuse to act on faith, the reason many of us fail to tune in to God’s voice, is that such steps as those might lead to a commitment of our lives to God’s service, and commitment is an ugly word these days. Just look around, there is very little family commitment today as is evident with all the disrespectful young people today and the high infidelity and divorce rate; there is little commitment in the work place which is evident in the products turned out today; there is little commitment in churches which is evident in declining membership, more to the point attendance rates. It takes more than just hearing, it takes listening and committing of our most valuable possession, our time.

Samuel had a heart of faith. He had a listening ear, and he had obedient hands, and he became one of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. He knew God in a way that few people will ever know Him, but the same option is open to us. We don't have to dangle helplessly three feet, let alone three inches from the ground, because God is speaking to our lives right now. We can know Him, but in order to know Him we must, believe in Him, we must listen for and to Him, and we must commit our whole lives to Him. Those are the simple steps of faith which can lead to a lifelong intimate relationship with God. Again, "Do You Hear That?" That's God calling.