

## Can You Hear Me Now? 1 Samuel 3.1-10

We are going to start this morning with a little brain teaser. If you know or come up with an answer please don't say anything until I ask for a response. I'll read the question and then give you a minute or two to think.

So, here is the brain teaser: You are driving a bus. You go east 12 miles, then turn south and go 2 miles stop and take on 9 passengers. Next you turn west and go 3 miles where you let 4 passengers off. How old is the bus driver? Would you like me to repeat it? ***(Pause and give people time to answer the question. Ask for answers.)***

The main problem many of us have when we try to answer this brain teaser is how we listen. A lot of times we latch onto certain information we think is important and then completely miss the most critical piece. When I first read this question, perhaps like some of you, I latched onto the directions (east, south, west), the distance and the number of passengers getting on and off the bus. Those are things that that are important right?

When I got to the end and it asked how old the bus driver is, I was, you might say, totally annoyed! "Wait a minute," I thought, "how am I supposed to figure out the age of the bus driver from the information given...stupid word

problems!” Then I decided to take another look at the numbers thinking there was maybe some secret message in them.

Or that maybe it was a trick question and if you add the miles together and divide by the number of passengers left on the bus you get the right answer. I’m somewhat embarrassed to admit that it took me a while to realize that the clue to the answer was a simple, three letter word right at the beginning.

“YOU are the bus driver.”

How often is it that we have this same problem with listening in real life? A parent, spouse, or friend asks you to do something and because you aren’t really paying attention you get in trouble for not doing what you were asked to do. Or your response to a question is completely unrelated to what the person asked you.

Or how about something like this. You take a test or exam, feel like you had all the right answers, or at least most of them, and figured you passed it. And then you find out you failed because you didn’t follow all the instructions, as in “read the instructions carefully” where at the very end of the paragraph of instructions it said: “Go to the end of the exam and only answer the last question.” Yep, got an F that day.

Listening is a crucial component in having healthy relationships. As human beings we seem to have a built-in need and desire to be listened to. When someone really listens to us they communicate that they think we are worth listening to and that they value us and our words. Listening well communicates love and respect.

We have probably all had at least one experience where we have poured our hearts out to a friend and their response was to say something completely unrelated to what you just shared. Do you remember how that felt? Were you hurt or upset? Did it make you wonder if the person actually cared about you? The sad but true fact is that we live in a day and age where there are so many distractions that listening well becomes more and more difficult and requires us to be intentional about listening carefully.

The same is true as we come into and grow in our relationship with God. One aspect of faith I think we often forget is the importance of **listening to God**. We talk about prayer, about how to worship, the importance of reading the Bible, of serving and all kinds of great and wonderful things. But how often do we talk about listening to God? If listening is an important component to human relationships imagine how much more important it is to our relationship with God!

How often do we read our Bibles and really meditate on the words rather than letting them in some sense go in one ear and out the other? How often do we pray by just throwing all of our requests at God without taking time to listen to what God may want to say to us? Today we are going to look at 1 Samuel 3:1-10 which I believe can give us some insights about listening to God.

“Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. <sup>2</sup> At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; <sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Then the Lord called, “Samuel! Samuel!”<sup>[a]</sup> and he said, “Here I am!” <sup>5</sup> and 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.

<sup>6</sup> The 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.” <sup>7</sup> Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. <sup>8</sup> The 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.

<sup>9</sup> Therefore 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. <sup>10</sup> Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Did you notice that verse one said, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."? Sounds a little bit like today, doesn't it? Be that as it may, I believe it is important for us to understand what this verse is getting at.

I suppose an argument could be made that this verse is saying God wasn't speaking to many people at that time. Well, only God knows whether that is true or not. However, based on the chapters that precede this passage it is far more likely that the root of the problem was that people had quit listening to God. It is recorded in chapter 2 Eli's sons were wicked and "had no respect for the Lord." Not only did they ignore their father's warnings about their behavior, they ignored the God who had called and instructed them. Eli's sons were not the only ones. They were what we might call the straw that broke the camel's back. During the previous

300 years when judges were ruling over Israel the people had repeatedly turned their backs on God, disobeyed God's commands and worshipped idols.

That is why messages from the Lord were rare and visions were uncommon. It wasn't that God wasn't speaking, it was that the ones who were suppose to be listening weren't. I suspect the same may be true today. God is speaking all the time to many people but, for the most part, we don't listen. I propose there are a number of reasons why we may be missing God's message, such as:

Being crazy busy. Our schedules are so loaded up with activity after activity that we don't ever take time to just stop and listen to God. Psalms 46:10 tells us to "Be still, and know that I am God." How often do we sit still and actually take time to just listen to God? And it is not just our days that are full of activity and noise.

Many of us don't even get ready for bed or go to sleep in physical or mental silence. Some of us fall asleep reading, working or doing homework. Others of us fall asleep with the television on or with music playing. There are few times day or night where we are still and quite. We are overloading ourselves with so many activities and so much noise that we are drowning out God's voice.

I wonder if one reason why we can hardly bare to remain silent is that it makes us feel so helpless. We are so accustomed to relying on words to manage and control others that we can't imagine being silent. If we are silent, who will take control? God will, that's who! But we will never let God take control until we trust him. Silence is intimately related to trust.

If the practice of silence is foreign to you I suggest experimenting with entering into silence using a method I learned about when reading Richard Foster's devotional, *Seeking the Kingdom*. Start by setting a realistic goal, such as five minutes of silence. First, find a comfortable position. Next, focus on relaxing each part of your body. Tense all the muscles in your face, then let them relax. Do the same with each part of your body: neck, shoulders, back, arms, hands, legs, feet. You are now ready to begin your silence. If something distracts you or a thought enters your mind, acknowledge it and then return to the silence. Remember, you are not trying to think of things to say to God, you are simply allowing God to fill you in silence.

Afterward, reflect on how easy or difficult you found it to be silent and then consider how you could make silence a part of your prayer life.

A second reason we may be missing God's message is that just like in the brain teaser, we are too often focused on the wrong things. Samuel was so focused on believing that it was Eli calling him that he never considered it might be God. Now in Samuel's case we know it is because "Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." We don't have that excuse!

When we let things like work, family, hobbies, money, and possessions take over our lives we leave no room for God. The remedy, of course, is simple. "Put first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you."

A third reason that might make hearing God difficult is having a grandiose idea of how God will speak to us. I that when and if we think about God speaking to us we tend to think it would be in some spectacular way. That things like flashes of lighting, booms of thunder, clouds and smoke that would accompany God's message to us. Or even better, there would be angels singing and trumpets blasting. You know something that would really make us sit up and take notice. Personally, I would be happy with a note on the refrigerator.



Well, if that is what we are expecting we are most likely going to be disappointed. While God sometimes does use dramatic things to get people's attention – like speaking to Moses from a burning bush, or to a guy named Balaam through a donkey, or, as he did with Jesus' mother, by way of an angel. However, those are the exceptions. God most often speaks in quiet and simple ways.

There is a great story in 1 Kings about a prophet named Elijah who is on a mountain top waiting for God to come so that they could speak. While he waits a “mighty windstorm hits the mountain” but God was not in the wind. After that there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. And then there was fire but no God there either. Finally, there was a gentle whisper and when Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out to have a conversation with God.

I think God most often speaks to us in very simple ways – through His words in the Bible, through other people, through nature, our consciences, through what we might call an impression or a series of events, and, maybe once in a great while, audibly. The truth of the matter is that if we are looking for some big, huge delivery system we miss fact God is already talking. We just aren't listening.

A fourth reason I think we often miss hearing God's message is because we have forgotten what God sounds like. In the midst of all the voices and messages we hear every day it can be difficult to pick God's voice out. This is especially difficult if we are not spending any time with God. It took three times for Eli to realize it was God speaking to Samuel. Perhaps it was because Eli had forgotten what God's voice sounded like.

As we grow and mature in our faith we should be getting more familiar with God's voice not less. When we let the noise of the world take over and spend less and less time with God, God's voice will become more and more unfamiliar.

The remedy, of course, is simple. Stay familiar with God's voice by dedicating time each day to study God's word, spending time in prayer being sure to include time to listen, paying attention to what God might be saying through other people, and noticing how the beauty of God's creation might be speaking to us.

There is one last lesson this passage can teach us and that is that when we do hear God's voice, we have to choose how we will respond. When Samuel learned that it was God speaking, he obeyed Eli and responded saying, "Speak, your servant is listening." Samuel could have

chosen – out of fear, out of not wanting to know what God had to say, or for any number of reasons – to ignore God. Instead he chose to respond and purposefully listened to what God had to say. We, too, have to make a choice when we hear God speak. We can choose to ignore God or we can listen carefully and do our best to obey.

God is speaking today whether we believe it or not. Whether we hear Him or not. My challenge to all of us is to start listening more carefully. Listening and responding is vital in a relationship with God. When we strive to be open and listen carefully, we can, just like Samuel, enter into an authentic dialog with God. We call this dialog prayer. It involves talking and listening. It is spontaneous and is fed by a mutual desire to engage one another at deeper levels. A disposition of openness to the sacred and a listening spirit are the first steps toward entering into a truly prayerful dialog with God.