

“The Voice of the Lord”  
1 Samuel 3: 1-20, January 15, 2012  
The Presbyterian Church of Dover DE

Last week we sang Psalm 29, wherein the psalmist described the voice of the Lord in dramatic images: the voice of the Lord is heard upon the waters, the voice of the Lord is full of majesty, the voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness. Today our texts from 1 Samuel and from the gospel according to John tell us of ways in which the voice of the Lord speaks to us as a calling voice. Both of these texts present us with important stories about how God calls God’s people. We are going to look more closely at the story about Samuel.

Martin Copenhaver is a United Church of Christ pastor in Massachusetts. This week I was reading an article he wrote about this passage, and I have adopted one of his phrases as the refrain for this sermon: it can be dangerous to hang out in the temple because, if you do, you just might hear the voice of the Lord.

From the time he was a very young boy, Samuel assisted in the family business. Samuel’s mother Hannah had prayed to God for a son; a son whom she would dedicate to the Lord. Hannah had brought her son to the priest, Eli, when he was just a little tyke. Samuel was to be “adopted” by the priest and brought up in the temple where he would learn to be a priest himself. At least, that was the idea. It’s true that learning to be a priest is not exactly what we think of as a family business. But that’s how it was in those days. Actually, Eli could have been a tailor or a butcher or a carpenter, and Samuel’s life would not have been all that different, in some ways. He helped Eli with chores around the temple – lighting lamps, cleaning up the sacrifices that were brought by the people, sweeping the floor, opening up in the morning, and closing up at night.

Samuel did all that because that's what was expected of him as the adopted son of a priest.

In other ways, however, Samuel's life was different from the life of other boys who were being brought up in the family business. After all, he was the son of the priest. So when the worshipers came to the temple or met Samuel at the market place, they most likely patted him on the head and said a cheerful word about the boy following in Eli's footsteps – something most preachers' kids are used to hearing. Most preachers' kids will also tell you that people often expect them to be just sort of naturally very religious, and that God must always seem very close to them. Of course, this is often not the case, and it was not the case with Samuel.

In fact, no one in or around the temple in those days seemed to be particularly close to the Lord. The writer of our text says, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." Sure, the people still brought their sacrifices, prayers were still lifted up to God. But even in the holy of holies within the temple, God did not seem all that close. It probably didn't help that Eli's two biological sons – Hophni and Phinehas – demanded a huge portion of every sacrifice that was offered. This practice outraged the Lord, and yet Eli – whether from dimness of sight or lack of attentiveness – did not see what was going on until some folks pointed it out to him. And when he chastised his sons, they ignored him, and did nothing to change their sinful behavior.

So, not many revelations happened in the temple anymore and, for the most part, people ceased to expect them. It's no wonder, then that when 12 year old Samuel heard a voice while he was asleep in the inner room of the temple, he assumed it was

the voice of Eli. Who else could it be? Three times he was awakened by the sound of his name echoing through the chamber: "Samuel! Samuel!" And three times he went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." The first two times Eli reassured Samuel that he had not called him, and told him to go back to sleep. He probably thought the boy was dreaming. But after the third time, Eli concluded that, even though the Lord hadn't been heard from in those parts for some time, perhaps Samuel was hearing the voice of the Lord. So Eli told Samuel if he heard the voice again to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Of course, Samuel did just that when the voice came again. Then the Lord told Samuel that Eli and Hophni and Phinehas were going to be punished for the bad things that had been taking place in the temple.

In the morning, Samuel opened up as usual and tried to go about his chores, but he had this terrible message burning a hole in his heart. When Eli demanded that Samuel tell him everything the Lord had said, he did it. He told it all, knowing that it was a tragic word for Eli to hear. It can be dangerous to hang out in the temple because, if you do, someday you just might hear the voice of the Lord.

Sometimes the voice of the Lord comes to people very audibly. I do not presume to discount that. For a lot of us, the voice of the Lord comes in less obvious ways. God may give us a message in a dream; God may speak to us in the voice of a loved one or even a total stranger. God may place a message in our heart that is so strong we must finally admit that it is the voice of the Lord. One of my closest friends in seminary once told me that she heard God's voice. And she grew up in a tradition where that was not widespread. She heard God's voice at a time when she was in a dark place of depression and despair. She heard God's voice telling her that God loved her more

than she could imagine – more than my friend even loved her own children. She began then to seek help for her depression. I don't doubt her. God speaks to us in many ways, especially if we hang out in the temple.

Martin Luther King, Jr. also went into the family business and became a minister. He once said, "Now of course, I was religious. I grew up in the church. I'm the son of a preacher... My grandfather was a preacher, my only brother is a preacher, my daddy's brother is a preacher, so I didn't have much of a choice, I guess. But I had grown up in the church, and the church meant something real to me, but it was a kind of inherited religion and I had never felt an experience with God in the way that you must if you're going to walk the lonely paths of life."

Nevertheless, Martin went to seminary, following in the footsteps of his father and his father's father. Even when he went to his first church in Montgomery, Alabama, he still had not had what he would call a firsthand experience of God, and he frequently considered pursuing a career in teaching. But then, in that same city, a woman named Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus, and Martin found himself in the midst of a bus boycott. Although he had only been in Montgomery a year and he was only 27 years old, he quickly became the leader of the movement. It wasn't long before he started getting threatening phone calls at church and at home – sometimes as many as 40 a day. He wondered if he could take it. He wanted out.

Then, one night, around midnight, another threatening call came through: "Boy, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your house."

Years later, Martin recalled, "I sat there and thought about our beautiful little daughter who had just been born... she was the darling of my life. I'd come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. And I sat at the kitchen table thinking about that little girl and thinking that she could be taken from me at any minute. And I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak. Something said to me, you can't call on Daddy now, he's up in Atlanta, 175 miles away. You can't even call on Mama now. You've got to call on that someone that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can find a way out of no way. And I discovered then that religion had become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed my head over that cup of coffee. I will never forget it... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night."

"And it seemed in that moment that I could hear a voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And I will be with you, even until the end of the world. I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on.'"

And, of course, that is just what he did.

All those years Martin Luther King, Jr. had gone with his father to the temple. The Lord was not absent in those years, of course, but then the Lord was not noticeably present either. At least not for him. In all of those years - going to Sunday school, singing in the choir, attending seminary, even as he began to serve his first church - he had never heard the voice of God. Then, when the threat of violence loomed and he was about ready to give it all up, the voice of the Lord came to him while he was sitting at that kitchen table. Sometimes you have to spend a lot of time tending the lamps and sweeping the floors of the temple before you hear the voice of the Lord.

And then, when the voice is finally heard, it rarely says the easy thing or the thing we want to hear. Samuel heard that the rest of his whole corrupt family would be punished. Martin Luther King, Jr. heard that he must not give up the perilous fight for justice. It can be dangerous to hang out in the temple because, if you do, you just might hear the voice of the Lord.

Andrew Young, who was a close friend of Dr. King's, is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. He once told some of his colleagues that he was delighted when his oldest daughter had become active in her local church. With each deepening level of her involvement he became more and more pleased. But one day she announced to her parents that she was going to join the ministry of Habitat for Humanity to build homes for the poor of Uganda. This was not too many years after the fall of Idi Amin, and Uganda was still a very violent country.

Andrew Young confessed, "I tried to talk her out of it. I mean, I wanted her to go to church, to find a nice Christian man to marry, to develop a relationship with God and settle down. But, believe me, I didn't have anything like this in mind. I didn't intend for her to go so far with it. I mean – Uganda! But she said she felt called. What could I say?"

Parents, keep this in mind when you bring your children to church. You may not be prepared for the consequences. It can be dangerous to have your children hang out in the temple because, if they do, someday they might just hear the voice of the Lord.

Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening. May it be so. Amen.

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Major source: Martin Copenhaver, "It Can Be Dangerous" *Pulpit Digest* 76, Jan/Feb 95, 5-9.

