

1 Samuel 3:1-20: **Ears Tingling**

C. Nolan Huizenga, Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville KY

14 January 2024

Our Hebrew scripture today comes from the first book named for the prophet and judge Samuel. Listen for God's word to us from 1 Samuel chapter 3. I'm reading from the Common English Bible. One language note: You'll hear the term "God's chest," which means the item that other translations call the Ark of the Covenant. It was a gilded box that represented the word and the very presence of God — the most holy item that ancient Israel possessed.

¹ Now the boy Samuel was serving the Lord under [the priest] Eli.

The Lord's word was rare at that time, and visions weren't widely known. ² One day Eli, whose eyes had grown so weak he was unable to see, was lying down in his room. ³ God's lamp hadn't gone out yet, and Samuel was lying down in the Lord's temple, where God's chest was.

⁴ The Lord called to Samuel. "I'm here," he said.

⁵ Samuel hurried to *Eli* and said, "I'm here. You called me?"

"I didn't call you," Eli replied. "Go lie down." So he did.

⁶ Again the Lord called Samuel, so Samuel got up, went to Eli, and said, "I'm here. You called me?"

"I didn't call, my son," Eli replied. "Go and lie down."

(⁷ Now Samuel didn't yet know the Lord, and the Lord's word hadn't yet been revealed to him.)

⁸ A third time the Lord called Samuel. He got up, went to Eli, and said, "I'm here. You called me?"

Then Eli realized that it was the Lord who was calling the boy. ⁹ So Eli said to Samuel, "Go and lie down. If he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening.'"

So Samuel went and lay down where he'd been. ¹⁰ Then the Lord came and stood there, calling just as before, "Samuel, Samuel!"

Samuel said, "Speak. Your servant is listening."

¹¹ The Lord said to Samuel, "I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of all who hear it tingle! ¹² On that day, I will bring to pass against Eli everything I said about his household — every last bit of it! ¹³ I told him that I would punish his family forever because of the wrongdoing he knew about — how his sons were cursing God, but he wouldn't stop them. ¹⁴ Because of that I swore about Eli's household that his family's wrongdoing will never be reconciled by sacrifice or by offering."

¹⁵ Samuel lay there until morning, then opened the doors of the Lord's house. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶ But Eli called Samuel, saying: "Samuel, my son!"

"I'm here," Samuel said.

¹⁷ "What did he say to you?" Eli asked. "Don't hide anything from me. May God deal harshly with you and worse still if you hide from me a single word from everything he said to you." ¹⁸ So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him.

"He is the Lord, " Eli said. "He will do as he pleases."

¹⁹ So Samuel grew up, and the Lord was with him, not allowing any of his words to fail. ²⁰ All Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was trustworthy as the Lord's prophet.

In scripture, judges and prophets don't decide on their own career paths. Instead each one has some kind of call story where the word of God breaks into their life. It's usually a surprise and it's not always pleasant. God's word burned like fire inside Jeremiah, and when Isaiah encountered the holy God in a vision, he presumed he was doomed.

Samuel's mother is named Hannah. An earlier story tells us that for a long time Hannah was unable to have children. She prayed passionately for God to change that, and she promised that if she bore a son she would bring him to the priests and dedicate him to serving the Lord. Samuel indeed was born and after he was weaned Hannah fulfilled her promise. So now Samuel lives with and learns from the priest Eli.

Eli is a dim-sighted old priest whose children have gone off the rails and embraced blatant injustice. Yet Eli has enough theological sense to invite the child Samuel into a contemplative practice: listening for God. An old person and a young person collaborate to hear about God doing a new thing.

When Samuel listens to God's voice here, he doesn't receive mystical revelations. Instead God confides bad news about Eli, Samuel's mentor. If you read the verses just *before* this, God previously sent a messenger to tell Eli basically the same thing: his sons have brought irreparable disaster and so Eli's family will be judged and their priestly calling will be revoked.

To Samuel's credit, he tells the truth even though he's delivering painful news for someone more powerful than he is. To Eli's credit, he takes seriously what the boy tells him, and he doesn't try to deny God's judgment. He faces candidly his own failure to halt his sons' corruption.

On this second Sunday after Epiphany this story reminds us that human speaking and hearing can be a crucial way for God's revelation to break into the affairs of this world.¹ As in the time of Eli and Samuel, we don't often receive grand miracles or visions on which to base our faith.

But when people speak the truth and others receive that truth — that's a primary way God still comes among us. Sometimes our ears tingle when we recognize it.

¹ Paraphrased from a point made by Richard Boyce in "1 Samuel 3:1-20: Exegetical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition. Location 8862.

When you read this book of 1 Samuel, you'll notice that a lot of it is political. And messy, even ugly. Which makes it all too familiar. Because Lord, do we need truth-telling in *our* society. Three Januaries ago a great fabrication of lies incited a mob to inflict real damage and death in the very center of our democracy.

If what happened on that 6 January makes us feel shame, anxiety, anger, grief — Eli and Samuel might be right there with us. They too struggled with the fragility of community life. They too faced people who acted as if their own desires were the only truth they cared about.

Why was God so angry with Eli's sons? Well, as priests they were responsible for helping people make sacrifices of thankfulness and atonement before God. Yet instead of serving the public good in that way, Eli's sons raided the offerings so *they* could eat the best cuts of meat. They used their power to oppress other people. And they sexually exploited women right at the temple.

Later in Samuel's life he'll get pressured by the people of Israel to anoint a king for them. Samuel tells them the truth: you really don't want an all-powerful authoritarian leader. He'll take your money, he'll demand your labor, he'll steal your land, he'll take your children, he'll send them off to die in war, he'll make your lives hell. The people say: okay, but a king will make us look strong and fearsome and we can win wars that way. So God tells Samuel to go ahead and give the people what they want.

Some of the resulting kings try to serve God and serve the people. But a lot of them prove disastrous, fulfilling all of Samuel's warnings. Eventually Israel would experience shattered kingdoms and the horror of exile. From those cultural ashes new life and hope would arise, and it began with prophets telling the truth about their people's history.

So thank God for employing imperfect, improbable people to convey God's word. Eli's failure as a father doesn't prevent him from guiding Samuel to be open to God's voice. Samuel himself will serve God faithfully for a lifetime, yet Samuel's own children also turn out to be scoundrels. In the sense of passing on familial faithfulness, he proves no better than Eli.

Yet God uses them both, like God uses Saul the mentally ill king, and Rahab the foreigner, and Mary the pregnant young fiancée. And Nathanael who dismisses Nazareth as hopelessly backward — and then a few sentences later spontaneously professes faith in Jesus as the Son of God.

I don't have a call story with the clarity of Samuel's or Nathanael's. But I can tell you about a personal experience when someone's words left *my* ears tingling.

It's June 2003. I'm separated from my then-wife, about to quit my job. I'm doing errands and a sign on a random gas station says they do oil changes for \$17 — great.

My car's in the shop. I'm in the dumpy waiting room with its broken chairs and dead coffee.

A woman employee outside pumps the gas (no self-serve allowed in Oregon). She comes in every few minutes to get a cigarette, put money in the register, whatever. She's probably only 40-something but she looks decades more worn. Tired, scraggly hair, sweatpants, grungy jacket. She's maybe lived a tough life. I notice her and say hi. We talk about the gray weather.

She comes back in a few minutes later and asks what I'm reading. I tell her it's a book by Alice Miller, about how our childhood experiences shape us.

"It's not a story, then?" she asks.

"No, it's nonfiction. I think the author is getting us to confront childhood pain so we don't have to relive it through our lives."

She says, "I'M not going to talk about MY childhood!" She looks serious, like it's too agonizing to go there.

Next time she comes in I ask if she gets time off on the weekend. She says no, but she hopes to finish this job soon and go back to her regular one in [something repetitive — I don't catch what she says]. She tells me she recently had carpal tunnel surgery and she's feeling better. I express surprise because many people don't find that surgery helps much. And that's the extent of our conversation.

Then when my car is ready she's ringing up the credit card when she turns, looks me straight on, and asks, "So are you studying to become a minister or something?"

My jaw drops. I say, "Well, I work as a computer technician, but I *have* just been accepted to seminary and I'm planning to go there. How could you possibly have known *that?!?*"

She says, "I can't tell you because you won't like it."

I say, "No, you can't offend me — I really need to know how you knew that!"

She says, "I just get these hunches about people. Seems to be some kind of gift because I'm often right." Then she goes on, as if it were directly related: "I've been stabbed, I've been shot, I've been drowned. Been down that tunnel of light three times, and each time something pulled me back. I know I was put here for some specific reason. I just hope that someday he tells me what it is."

I say, "I can at least empathize with that — I have been trying my whole life to discern my purpose here."

I say, "It's a real honor to meet you," and I shake her hand. She tells me she's Susan Smithson. She says, "Well, I'll be here and it would be nice to see you again."

I drive off grinning and in total shock.

A few weeks later I found that gas station out of business with a For Sale sign on it. I never again saw Susan Smithson. But that total stranger foresaw me becoming a minister. *Maybe* on that day Susan conveyed the voice of God saying to me, "I will walk with you along this new path."

Friends, when have your own ears tingled from hearing truth?
From whom did you hear it, and who helped you understand it?

We do not do this discernment alone. Remember that Samuel heard *something*, but he needed Eli's guidance to help him identify it as God's voice. *Eli* also listened without defensiveness and he validated that God had spoken through Samuel.

So when God's call comes to us, how can it encourage us to partner with with other people and other communities?

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a national holiday to celebrate the accomplishments of the King's prophetic work toward racial equity. I hope that you have been given the day off from school or work. Whether you have that privilege or not, let's all try to find *some* time tomorrow to listen for God in a way that honors the Rev. Dr. King. Because he also partnered with many others in discerning and proclaiming God's truth.

Read or listen to one of his sermons or speeches.

Get to know better someone of a different race.

Volunteer for a cause that matters.

Pray for this church, that God may guide us in becoming better partners in the work of antiracism.

And listen for God to speak through someone improbable.

When God's truth does tingle our ears, may we like Samuel become its trustworthy bearers.

In the name of the God the Voice, the Word, and the Interpreter.