

Sermon: Speak Lord, For Your Servant is Listening

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Jan 14, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Perhaps the first real challenge that I had faced in ordained ministry, a challenge that I fumbled terribly, involved Steven. Steven was a young man that I had known for years, prior to me answering the call to pastoral ministry back to my home congregation, the congregation that I grew up with in Montreal. I did not know him well per se, but he and his mother had always struck me as been quite devout, leaning towards the charismatic side of the Christian faith. He had a passion for the Lord, and a passion for sharing the Good News of Jesus with other young people. In that sense, Steven and I were quite similar, and I had hoped that I could count on him, to share in the burden of ministry as a brother and a coworker in Christ.

I was terribly disappointed when soon after my induction, Steven informed me that he felt God was calling him, to travel to the United States, to join the ministry of Benny Hinn, the famed televangelist who was known for his ministry of miracle healing. Now looking back and upon further reflection, I really should've cautioned him, and help him to discern this supposedly call from God. But I did not have the life experience, nor the ministry know how, so I did the next best thing (or worse thing depending on one's point of view). I blessed him and sent him on his way. Who was I to stop God's call? Who was I to tell someone they are making a serious life mistake? It's not my business after all! Well, I was terribly wrong.

Months after, I forgot how many, Steven returned home to Montreal, in a severe psychotic state, with outwardly violent tendency, fully believing that God was speaking to him. He was eventually picked by the police, hospitalized in a psychiatric institution. It would take another 1/2 a year of treatment, counselling, and numerous pastoral visits and conversations, for Steven to regain a firm grasp on reality and to be re-integrated eventually to the rest of the society. I never did find out what happened to him in the United States, or if he ever made it to Benny Hinn's 'Miracle Crusade'. Steven refused to discuss it with me at all. That entire ordeal, taught me many things, but first and foremost, the important role that a pastor could play as a mentor to someone discerning God's call.

Samuel had a mentor, the priest Eli, when he was growing up. In our Scriptural readings today, of 1 Samuel 3, we come to the story of the call of Samuel, as a little boy living in the temple of the Lord in Shiloh. Now the priest Eli was probably not a good mentor at all. He had not taught his two sons the fear of the Lord, and had allowed them to run amok, abusing their privileges, taking for themselves what was devoted to God. Moreover, the Bible informs us, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” One could connect the dots and picture the negligence of Eli in discharging his duties to his own house, or to the household of God.

Samuel came to this household by his mother Hannah, by her devotion to the Lord, and her insistence to repay God’s generosity by granting her a son, in a most improbable way. So Hannah devoted her first born to God, and sent the child Samuel to live with Eli, to be mentored by him, and to grow up while ministering to the Lord.

So during one evening, both Eli and Samuel were lying down, getting ready to sleep, with Eli in his room and Samuel beside the ark of God. While the lamp of God had not yet gone out, Samuel heard a call, “Samuel! Samuel!” Thinking it was from Eli, Samuel replied, “Here I am!” and ran to the old priest. Of course the old priest was annoyed, just like any other parent being woken up by an overexcited youngster with an overactive imagination. So Eli shushed the young Samuel, saying, I did not call...[oh, just go back to sleep!]

Then the same call happened again, “Samuel! Samuel!” The same responses from both Samuel and Eli, the second time. It wasn’t until the third time did Eli the old priest realized, finally, the call may have originated from God. So he mentored Samuel, “Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, **“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”**

I used to think that was the end of the story, a favourite Sunday School story albeit, that Samuel learns to listen to God, an endearing story that many of you are undoubtedly familiar. Until I started to pay more attention to what God actually had to say to Samuel in the rest of the chapter 3. This is what God said to Samuel, in verse 11-14, *“See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I*

swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."

Now Eli and his two sons probably deserved what was coming to them, but why tell Samuel? What is the point for God to reveal to that little child, that would surely and doubly make his ears tingle in the hearing of it? This so call the 'call of Samuel' involves nothing that Samuel needs to do, nothing that he could do. Eli was already warned by God previously, and he had already chosen to ignore it. There is nothing that Samuel could say, to Eli or to anyone else that would change the course lay out by God. This call of Samuel is not a call to do, but a call to be, to simply listen. This is not a call to arm but a call to be quiet before the Lord, and to simply bear witness. Most importantly of all, this is a call to initiate a relationship, from God to Samuel, and from such a starting point, all things will eventually follow.

I try to imagine Samuel upon hearing what the Lord had to say. I try to picture him laying beside the ark of the covenant, chewing over the words of God. The cover picture in today's bulletin, by Frank Wesley, an internationally renowned artist from the Lucknow school of painting in India, perfectly illustrates that. What draws me to this painting is the contrast in scale, of a little child in an enormous temple, a subtle hint of what Samuel was facing, the enormity of knowing that his world, everything that he has known was about to be turned up-side-down, and there is absolutely nothing he could do but to simply sit quietly and wait upon the Lord. I think perhaps that is the most important lesson in this story of the call of Samuel.

Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, has a very healthy, holistic and communal view on call. In the document titled 'Call to Ministry' published by the PCC, we are informed that 'the primary vocation of all Christians is to be in relationship with God through Christ. We delight in God's gracious love and respond in praise and gratitude. As the Shorter Catechism says, "Our chief end is to glorify and enjoy God forever."'

People sometimes throw around the word 'call' a bit too casually... such as, 'God is calling me to go there, to do that'. There is no denying that God does call individuals to a specific purpose, or a specific ministry. However, long before that, God calls all, and the primary response of all who profess faith in Jesus Christ, is simply be in relationship with God, and to respond to God in praise and thanksgiving. In praise for God's love as manifested in Christ. In thanksgiving for God's continuing gifts to us

in talents and resources, in faith and friendships, in families and communities.

It is only in the context of this relationship God gives each of us a vocation that involves our total selves, who we are and our God-given gifts. Only when that primary vocation is fulfilled then do we venture to the secondary vocation, that is the exercise of these gifts in service to God, as Living Faith 7.2.1 informs us, "*All Christians are called to participate in the ministry of Christ. As his body on earth we all have gifts to use in the church and in the world to the glory of Christ, our King and Head.*"

Samuel will eventually grow up to serve the Lord in mighty ways, but for now he would have to wait. He would have to first learn to listen to the words of God, and let none fall to the ground. This posture of waiting and listening and treasuring God's words is the lesson for us, as individuals, and as the community of faith, in the heart of the Glebe. **Speak Lord, for your servants are listening.**

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**