

Sunday, January 18, 2015: 1 Samuel 3:1-20

## **I used to think that the end of Samuel's story was when he learns to listen to God. I wasn't curious at all about what God has to say.**

by [Diane Roth](#) in the [January 7, 2015](#) issue

A couple of years ago, my congregation decided to do *lectio divina* as part of our midweek Lenten worship. After our opening liturgy and prayer, we entered into this ancient Benedictine practice of scripture reading and expectant listening. Three times we heard a word from God; three times we trained our ears to pick out the voice of God in the silence.

Each week we began our time of *lectio divina* with words from 1 Samuel 3:9: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." What more appropriate verse could there be, I thought? Eli teaches Samuel that God is calling him. He teaches him to listen, expecting God to speak. If we use Samuel's words, we will know that God is speaking to us, too.

Our congregation tried this practice specifically during Lent because we were convinced that one key to revitalizing our congregation was learning again how to listen—to God, to one another, and to our neighbors. When we start believing that God speaks to us—and even more than that, that God is calling us—this is when renewal begins.

As for me, I used this verse from 1 Samuel intentionally as well. I have loved it for a long time. I used to wonder why "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" was not a part of our regular Sunday liturgies. The words just sounded like they belonged in worship, like a line of poetry. So I grabbed at the chance to make it part of *lectio*.

I have known the story of Samuel since I was a small child, when my grandmother gave me a narrow maroon book with gilt edges called *Children of the Bible*. It featured realistic pictures of Miriam, Isaac, Joseph (and his coat), 12-year-old Jesus, and of course Samuel. I remember that Samuel was depicted as a curly-headed,

dark-eyed, and very young child. He is in bed but sitting up, listening. He is listening for the voice of God, just as Eli instructed.

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” The verse is a fulcrum for all that comes before and after. In the stories of my childhood, the lesson always ended here, when Samuel finally gets it right, when he finally realizes that God is calling him. It is a story that takes place in the darkness. It is night, and Samuel is sleeping in the place where the Ark of the Covenant is located. (I never noticed that detail as a child.) It is night for Eli, whose eyesight is dimming and who has forgotten what God’s voice sounds like. It is night for Samuel, who doesn’t realize that what he is hearing is the voice of God. And it is night as well for Israel. The first verse of chapter three sets the tone: “The word of the Lord was rare in those days. Visions were not widespread.”

How often might God be trying to speak to us, but we are not listening? Is it possible that we don’t even recognize the sound of God’s voice? If so, who can teach us? Is it possible that the very young and the old among us, those most often dismissed, are the ones with the insight, the wisdom, and the openness to teach?

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”—Eli knows these words, but perhaps he hasn’t spoken them in years. He has long since ceased to expect God’s voice. I used to think that this was the end of Samuel’s story: he learns to listen to God. Strangely, I wasn’t curious at all about what God has to say to Samuel. I didn’t wonder about the particular word that God has for him. Perhaps I just assumed that it’s something affirming or heartwarming—something like the daily devotions I usually read that remind me that I am God’s child, that God loves me even in the midst of adversity, even when the light has gone out.

These are good messages. They are not, however, the particular message that God has for Samuel. God’s word for Samuel is a word of judgment on the house of Eli. This must be a hard word for the young boy to hear, a hard word to tell. Yet ultimately it is a good word, because it is a word about the renewal of Israel.

I can’t help thinking that the lessons of *lectio divina* and the lessons of Samuel are similar. In order to hear we need to expect that God will speak to us, that the word of God will come to us. But the word we receive is never general, always particular—and it is a good word but not necessarily an easy one. God will not just tell us to forgive people; God will send us to forgive a particular person. God will not

just tell us to love people but will send us on a particular mission of love, embodied.

When we say “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,” perhaps we are opening a can of explosives. Who knows where God will lead us?