

# **“HEARING THE CALL: Can You Hear Me Now?”**

1 Samuel 3:1-10 and 11-21

Sunday, January 14, 2018

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

Today we continue our series, “Hearing the Call” to help us recognize and respond to God’s call in our lives. Last week we reflected on Jesus proclaiming the coming of God’s kingdom and then inviting fishermen to follow him, by saying “Come follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

He told them of God’s new reality and gave them new purpose. He invited them to hear the good news and follow in a new way. He invited them to LEARN and LIVE.

Today, you’ve heard the well-loved call of the boy Samuel, who has a hard time hearing God’s call, even though he’s in the sanctuary. He needs some help from Eli, which reminds us that it can be hard to know God’s will alone. We can help each other to hear God’s call in our lives.

While there have always been challenges to hearing God’s call, I think it’s especially challenging today, with all the distractions and noise in our lives. One of the biggest distractions we are faced with is technology and with the almost perpetual presence of screens in our lives.

I am involved with Principal’s advisory group at Memorial High School. Once a month, about a dozen of us meet with Principal Jay Affeldt to discuss various topics. Over the last two meetings, we have focused on phones and screen usage.

As we discussed the challenges of teaching students who might be distracted on their phones and issues like cyber-bullying and isolation, we also recognize that excessive screen usage is not just a problem that kids have.

We are surrounded by TV monitors, tablets, phones, and more. There is increasing talk about problems associated with excessive screen usage, for both kids and adults. Some studies show increased depression. Others use language of addiction.

One of the early designers of the iPhone is now voicing strong concern about unhealthy habits of screen usage. Tony Fadell is his name and he expressed concern in a recent CNN article (which I ironically read on my phone) about a variety of problems associated with excessive screen usage, using the language of addiction and unintended consequences.

<http://money.cnn.com/2018/01/11/technology/apple-addiction-kids-smartphones-fix/index.html>

He suggests that perhaps phones should come with suggested use guidelines, sort of like food packaging that tells you the fat, sugar, and salt content. He notes that alcohol has warning labels and that we regularly weigh ourselves and get vital signs checked, so maybe we should have more cautionary words and more ways of checking our screen usage.

What a fascinating idea. Actually there are some tools and warnings already out there.

I remember there was a computer game my kids and I used to play and every so often a dialog box would pop up and say “why don’t you take a break and go outside?” or something like that. Sometimes we did. And sometimes we didn’t

And I recently learned that I can track my usage history on my phone. Under “settings,” if I click on “battery” I get a report of what percentage of my time I’ve spent doing various things. I imagine every phone has info like this.

I was a bit surprised to see the weekly report, to see how much time I had spent on CNN, ESPN, Facebook, and email. None of those things is bad, but I know I have to be careful about overuse.

We adults who voice concern about what “the kids” are doing on their phones all the time might need to check our own habits first. And it’s not just our phones, but also our tablets, our desktop computers, and good old TV. How much screen time is enough?

The point is that if we aren’t careful we get sucked into endless scrolling through social media, sports scores and statistics, breaking news update, stock market tickers, shopping bargains, home remodeling tips, and puppy videos.

And it's really hard because there is no end in sight once we get online. If you watch one video, as soon as it's done, another one starts.

Now I use social media, I watch sports, and I even like puppy videos too. In moderation, such things are ok. But with everything from alcohol to chocolate to whatever, we tend to have trouble with moderation.

Our phones can be wonderful tools to provide entertainment, communication and information. Technology is a an incredible gift.

But it's so easy to sucked into a vortex of distraction. Kind of like opening the fridge to make a salad and ending up with chips, cookies, and ice cream instead.

The bigger point for us Christians is to be aware of who or what we are listening to. Who or what guides us and shapes us?

On a regular basis, people tell me things like:

- I want to be a better person, a good parent, a good neighbor
- I hope to be like so-and-so one day
- I want to know God's will
- I wish I knew more about the Bible,
- I hope to grow in my faith and discover my purpose in life

If we're really serious about regaining focus and clarity, about strengthening our faith and living with purpose, and about hearing the call of God, then many of us will have to change our habits, including our screen time habits.

We need to make good choices about who and what we listen to. We need to make room for God to speak to us, and even be ready for God to change us.

And we might need an Eli in our lives, someone to gently, lovingly, persistently help us make room to listen. Or maybe we need to be Eli for someone else—to gently, lovingly, persistently help them hear God's call.

This account from scripture is fascinating and we can learn from it.

Young Samuel is in the temple but doesn't seem to expect God to speak. Isn't that interesting....? In We learn that the word of God was rare in those days.

And suddenly God is speaking. Old Eli recognizes it and encourages Samuel to be alert for the call, and when it comes again, Samuel famously says, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.”

That is the reading you heard a few minutes ago. And it is a fairly familiar reading, with a good message about listening for God’s word, in a time of political chaos, when the people of God were moving from judges to kings.

So Samuel has this beautiful moment of recognition, that God is calling him, and with determination and enthusiasm, he says “Speak Lord, your servant is listening. It’s sort of a spiritual mountaintop reading, encouraging us to be available to hear what God is saying and even to think about how we can help others hear God. Many a good sermon have been preached on these verses.

But the narrative continues. And it’s not simply a story of hearing God, because there are things Samuel has to do, challenging things. God doesn’t speak to Samuel just to make him feel good. God has a job for him to do, which is our second reading today.

As we learn earlier in 1 Samuel, Eli’s sons have become corrupt and greedy, abusing their positions of leadership and responsibility.

God tells Samuel that he must denounce Eli, which Samuel doesn’t want to do. To his credit, Eli recognizes that the truth must be spoken, so he encourages Samuel, even though he knows that the words will be hard.

<sup>11</sup>Then the LORD said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. <sup>12</sup>On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.”

<sup>15</sup>Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. <sup>16</sup>But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” He said, “Here I am.” <sup>17</sup>Eli said, “What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.” <sup>18</sup>So Samuel told him everything

and hid nothing from him. Then he said, “It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him.”

<sup>19</sup>As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. <sup>20</sup>And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD. <sup>21</sup>The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

So Samuel not only learns to hear the word of God and to know his call, but he also finds the courage to speak truth to power, to say the hard things that need to be said. He becomes trustworthy, being grounded in listening to God.

God reaches out to us, with a message of love and affirmation, along with a calling, a purpose, a task. And sometimes that task is hard work. So we need to listen carefully.

We might be called to speak truth to power.

We might be called to say or do hard things at work, at school, in our families.

We can be guided by the familiar words of Ephesians 4.15, one of my favorite verses, which encourage us to speak the truth in love. I’ve always liked those words, and reading them in context, I like them even more.

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ....

--Ephesians 4:14-15 (NRSV)

God might be trying to call you, to get your attention, because God wants you to do something important, like Samuel or to say something important.

Or maybe God wants to use you like Eli, to help someone hear their call and find their way.

As Christians, like those first disciples, we are called by Jesus to be part of this new kingdom and to live with new purpose.

The United Church of Christ has a wonderful slogan: “God is still speaking.”

Question for us: are we listening?

Let me invite you this week, as we start the day or before you turn on your computer, your tablet your phone, to just pause for a few seconds, close your eyes and say “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.” Amen.