

SCRIPTURE'S GREATEST HITS

Listening for God

1 Samuel 3:1-20

June 25, 2023

"The sensation of being alive in the early 21st Century consisted of the [distressing] sense that our ability to pay attention was cracking and breaking...like our civilization had been covered with itching powder and we spent our time twitching and twerking our minds, unable to simply give attention to the things that matter."

When I read those words in Johann Hari's new book *Stolen Focus*, it was as if the author had been peering over my shoulder for the last three years. Perhaps you feel the same way hearing them now. Hari introduced me to the concept of the *attention economy*—the notion that human attention is the scarcest commodity, the limiting factor in our consumption of information, and the object of intense competition. That is, as the demands *on* our attention have grown in scope and complexity, the bitter contest *for* our attention has grown fiercer. Perhaps you've noticed. Prioritizing what matters and maintaining focus are profound challenges in our time. We are a distracted and preoccupied people, often overwhelmed by the sound and fury of information assaulting our senses at all hours and on every inch of the globe. I remember hiking at the top of Scarp's Ridge in a remote part of western Colorado. I was nearly 13,000 feet up. Not a soul in sight. And my phone began to buzz. A phone call. Would I like to participate in a survey? There is truly no escaping the attention economy.

The word of the Lord was rare in those days.

That's how this morning's scripture begins. God's voice rarely heard. Visions of the sacred not often reported. This story in First Samuel, it's one of our oldest stories, and it might just be our very best one. I

love it. It describes a relatable experience for some of us. It is happening with great regularity in our house these days. Middle of the night. Fast asleep. Sudden awareness. A small person standing there, staring at you. "Dad, I can't sleep. I had a bad dream. I heard a scary noise. I need to sleep in your bed." And, perhaps we try the same thing old Eli did. Three times Samuel wakes him having heard a voice in the middle of the night, and twice Eli tells Samuel, "Go back to bed."

And why not? Afterall, *the word of the Lord was rare in those days*. Who would have expected it to be the voice of God?

Samuel and Eli are literally living in the temple, but even there this is no exception—no expectation of a divine voice or a holy vision. Until finally, the third time God calls, the old priest perceives a different possibility. Eli instructs Sam on how to respond if it happens again.

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

When the child does this, the course of his entire life is set, radically changed. He will be a seer. A leader. A prophet. A kingmaker. A voice of the divine. Once God gets Samuel's attention, his vocation comes into clear focus. Once Samuel speaks those words, *your servant is listening*, God's call.

What are we to make of this ancient story of a child hearing voices in the middle of the night? How do we apply the call of Samuel to our own lives and our stories?

Often it seems that what was spoken in the time of Samuel is true of ours as well. *The word of the Lord is rare in these days*. God's voice not often heard.

Visions of the sacred not often reported. And, when they are, we tend toward justifiable skepticism. *You heard what? You heard who?*

Whenever I consider the assumption of God's silence, I'm reminded of just how loud my life is, just how intense the fight for every ounce of our attention. Consider this: if God were speaking, how would we ever hear? How would we ever perceive this voice in the cacophony of contemporary culture and the endless onslaught of streams of information?

Two of the reasons I love the story of Samuel's call are (1) the voice is not immediately recognizable and (2) the boy does not (cannot?) discern it on his own. These are valuable lessons for those of us who long to listen for God.

It takes God four times to get through to Samuel. And so it is for most of us, I think. We may envy those who have heard God speak in such a clarion voice that they need no repetition. They know immediately what's on God's mind. No need to ask for confirmation.

But it's not that way for most of us. Most of us require steady, patient repetition, a refrain of providence. The first time we experience a nudge that might just be divine, we can easily dismiss it. Coincidence. Chance. Accident. Something I ate. Certainly no reason to get all excited. No reason to change the course of my life or ruffle any feathers. But what about the third time, the fourth time, the fifth time?

I have a friend who has recently made the risky decision to change career paths from a safe and profitable trajectory to one that offers no such guarantee. When I asked him why, here's how he responded: "I want my life to count for something more than money. I tried and couldn't shake the nagging feeling that I could achieve by every measure and still feel empty inside." God's call is patient but persistent in getting our attention. Where might God be waiting for you to make a change or answer the call?

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

Still, it is not repetition alone that gets Sam's attention. Samuel did not yet know the Lord. And without the presence of Eli, he may never have. For many of us, the voice of God is heard in the voice of other human beings. People who know us. People who love us enough to tell us the truth about our lives, to shine a light of revelation, to open a door to a new epiphany, to point the way to God's call. It strikes me that Eli knows Samuel. It strikes me that Samuel trusts Eli.

Who has been Eli for you? Who has perceived the possibility that God might be speaking?

Who has been your Eli? Urged you to listen? Encouraged you to pay attention? Guided you to a new direction?

Who has been your Eli? Who has affirmed your gifts and your talents, the nudges of the divine in your life?

Orval Wintermute was a professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages at Duke University. He translated the Dead Sea Scrolls. He contributed to ground-breaking work in understanding the ancient world in which many of our biblical texts were written.

But that's not why I'm thinking of Orval this morning. After a career teaching for forty years, Orval retired and began a new stage of his life. Since he is an ordained Presbyterian minister, he decided he would return to the parish. Specifically, he became pastor of a fifteen-member congregation an hour north of Duke's campus. When he had to be out for the summer with knee replacement surgery, the church asked a college freshman to preach and visit and teach for that small church. But before he would let me loose on the congregation, Orval and I traveled up to Warrenton several times together. Over the next three years, we traveled that road weekly together. Through personal crisis and community concern, deaths, illnesses, and all the issues of congregational life, we traveled that road back and forth. We conversed about theology and scripture, about how to care for a congregation.

We discussed the academy or the parish, the parish or the academy. He listened. He encouraged. And in his voice, I began to perceive my own call. In the years since, I have taken many wonderful courses and read many books on ministry, but not one has taught me more than what I learned riding in Orval's car or watching him pull his chair right up next to a dying person so that he could hold her hand and look in her eyes while he prayed. In the corner of that hospital room, a college student was watching, listening, feeling the tug toward a life of ministry.

What I mean to say is that we all need Orvals—Elis—people who point the way toward God's call in our life, and we can all fill that role for someone else.

You see, in the church, we have a unique call to be a listening community, to listen to each other's lives, to listen for the voice of God, to affirm and celebrate the gifts of God that are given to each and every one of us. In a time when our attention is commodified and our distractions are multiplied, we must set time aside to listen prayerfully and well.

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening—the wisest advice the old priest ever gave his young apprentice, because it opened a new world. And because Samuel, whose name means "God has heard," listened to Eli and to God, this child found the courage to embrace his call.

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

A powerful prayer. A risky choice. If we open our ears to the voice of God, we will be challenged, and we may be changed. Our priorities realigned. Our attention redirected. Our relationships reset. Our life's purpose rediscovered. It's probably easiest to just ignore it. Coincidence. Accident. It's probably best to drown the voice in a flood of excuses and distractions. To dismiss, demean, tune out, and turn down. After all, the word of the Lord is rare these days.

Except. *Samuel! Psst...Samuel!*

Listen. God is calling.