Several years ago, author and journalist Thomas Friedman coined a phrase that captures the spirit of our time. Friedman wrote, “It is the malady of modernity. We have gone from the Iron Age to the Industrial Age to the Information Age to the Age of Interruption.” He quotes corporate consultant Linda Stone, who labeled ours as a time of “continuous partial attention.” The description makes me squirm a bit, mainly because it offers such an accurate picture of my life: “Continuous partial attention is when you are checking Facebook on your phone...while also watching TV, typing an email on your computer and answering a question from your kid. That is, you are multitasking your way through the day, continuously devoting only partial attention to each act or person you encounter.” Bullseye.

We all experience it, whether we are the offender or the victim. Constant access to information and connection means constant interruption. At some level, most of us are “on call” twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This hyper-connectivity has created a whole new set of behaviors and worries. Cell phones ring during meetings, concerts, movies, weddings and funerals, even church services. I remember a couple of years ago when a phone rang during the middle of a wedding rehearsal I was leading. I was frustrated and unhappy. Before we began I had been very clear that everyone was to silence their phones or turn them off completely. Everyone frantically reached for their phone, then looked up with relief. The phone kept ringing. It was mine. Now, before you judge me too harshly, how many of you just checked to be sure your phone was silenced? Continuous partial attention. It is a reality for us all.

So, here is the question for those of us who want to be faithful to God’s call in the Age of Interruption: in a time of ceaseless communication and unlimited connectivity, how do we recognize God’s voice in the cacophony of distraction?

This morning’s scripture offers an example. It’s one of our oldest and best stories; I just love it. It begins with a relatable experience for many of us. Sara and I have not yet had it, but we’ve been warned that it will happen to us as well. “Soon or later,” more experienced parents tell us, “you will be lying in there sleeping and all of a sudden you’ll be aware that a small person is standing by your bedside, staring at you.” “I can’t sleep,” the child says, “I had a bad dream...there’s a monster in the closet...I heard a scary noise...I need to sleep in your bed.” And, perhaps you’ll say the same thing old Eli said. Three times Samuel wakes him having heard a voice. Three times Eli tells Samuel to go back to bed.

The narrator makes it painfully clear—the voice of God was rarely heard in those days. Samuel is living in the temple, but he does not recognize God’s voice. How could he? No one expected God to speak. Finally, the fourth time God calls, the old priest perceives the possibility and tells Sam how to respond if it happens again: “Speak, for your servant is listening.” Your servant is listening. It is the decision to listen that opens Samuel to God’s persistent call.

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 these days. This does not mean that no one is talking about God; on the contrary talk about God is ubiquitous in our time. But listing for God’s voice is rare. Instead, we mistake our arguments and debates about God’s perspective on any given issue with the word of God written on our hearts and the voice of God calling for us to listen. In my experience, the word of the Lord is never faithfully proclaimed in angry shouting voices. Instead, I believe God speaks to us when our hearts and minds are truly open—when we devote more than partial attention to God. In a culture of too much noise and too many competing voices, God is still speaking. But we must have the wisdom to listen. This is the invitation offered in this holy season of Lent—an invitation to listen for God’s voice in our lives.
I love the story of Samuel's call because the voice is not immediately recognizable as God; it takes God four times to get through to Samuel. That's true for most of us, I think. We envy those who have heard God speak in such a clear, clarion voice that they know exactly what’s on God’s mind, what God thinks about this or that, what God wants them to do with their life. But it’s not the way it is for most of us. For most of us, the call of God comes most clearly in the voices of other human beings. I wonder who has played the role of Eli in your life? Who has perceived the possibility that God might be speaking to you? Who has urged you to listen, to pay attention, to open your heart and mind to a new direction? Who has affirmed your gifts and talents, your sense of call?

Listen. The greatest gift we can give to another person is to attend, to pay attention, to listen with full attention— without interruption. Listening is an act of love that holds within it the possibility of transformation. This is true in intimate relationships—what would it mean to listen rather than preparing to respond? It is true between parents and children—not long ago, I was on the phone in my car. Our Samuel was sitting in the backseat patiently, until finally I hear, “I don’t want Daddy to talk anymore.” Listen. It is true in offices and classrooms and workplaces. It is true over cups of coffee or shared meals. It is true in conversations when the topic of discussion is difficult and people have different opinions and come to different conclusions. Listen. Stop talking and listen. Stop, for a moment, pursuing your agenda and listen to the hopes, needs, fears of another. Set aside your self for a moment so another self has space to be and freedom to speak. In the age of interruption and continuous partial attention, listening is nothing short of a revolutionary act of love for another. When was the last time someone stopped what they were doing or saying long enough to listen attentively to you? When was the last time you offered that same gift to another? In the church, I believe we have a unique call to be a listening community—we are called to hear each other's voices, to listen for the voice of God, and to lift up the voices of those who often go unheard. This call has perhaps never been more important. In a time of shouting voices urging division and even hatred of others, we must listen even more intentionally for God’s voice. We must listen prayerfully before we speak in anger or respond with hostility to another of God’s beloved children.

Listen. It was the wisest advice the old priest ever gave to his young apprentice. It opened a new world of possibility. And because Samuel, whose name meant “God has heard,” had the sense to listen, to Eli and to God, his life’s work became speaking God’s word to a people deeply in need of it. God was calling, and Samuel heard and responded.

I love this story because I believe the word of the Lord can still be heard. I believe that God does call you and me. I believe the voice of God comes to us in many different ways: in the beauty of a sunset, the power of a storm, a baby’s cry, our own breath telling us that this life is good and holy and a gift given to us new every morning, calling us to gratitude. And I believe, above all, that God calls us in the voices of others...if we are listening.

Samuel! Samuel! God is calling. Amen.

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http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/05/opinion/05friedman.html