

The Voice

1 Samuel 3:1-20

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Those of us who grew up going to Sunday School know the story of the boy Samuel. His mother had given him up to the priest Eli as a foster father so that he could be trained as a priest. This was before the time when the temple had been built, so they lived in the tabernacle where the ark of the covenant was kept and a lamp was kept burning next to the bread offered to Yahweh. Samuel has been growing up in chapter 2, so by this point he is actually a young man ready for responsibility.

In the wee hours of the morning, Samuel, sleeping right there by the ark, hears someone calling his name, waking him up. Naturally he assumes it is the old man Eli, so he goes to his room. "Sir, you called?" "No, go back to bed." It happens a second time, with the same response. But the third time Samuel comes to Eli, the priest understands that someone *is* calling the young man by name. It must be the Lord. So he tells Samuel, "If it happens again, say 'Speak, Yahweh. I am listening.'" And sure enough, Yahweh speaks.

What would you do if you heard the voice of God? We are of two minds about that, aren't we? On the one hand, we come here hoping that God will say something to us, somehow, through the scriptures, through the songs, through a tugging on our hearts. On the other hand, we are not sure that God really speaks. If other people hear voices, we call them psychotic. If we hear voices—or even get some kind of impression from God—most of us are pretty quick to discount the experience.

In Peggy Payne's novel called *Revelation* [Banks Channel Books, 1995] the main character is Swain Hammond, the Yale-educated pastor of Westside Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Westside Church is a drifting, vaguely liberal congregation, full of "academics from the university community" and other "bright, interesting people." Pastor Swain seems to be their perfect match. The only problem is that Pastor Swain hears the voice of God. In his Chapel Hill backyard one day, he is sipping a beer and lighting the charcoal grill when he hears God speak audibly for the first time. He hears the voice as it comes over the hill. He stands frozen and feels it coming "like a hugely amplified PA system." The voice says, "Know that the truth is..." (p. 12) That's it: "Know that the truth is..."

He hears these puzzling words, but he is absolutely sure that the words came from God. Now, Swain must face his Sunday congregation with this new and unsettling experience. He wonders, "What am I going to tell them?" He imagines himself in the pulpit, staring out at the congregation. He sees the horror on their faces as they begin to understand what he is telling them. He sees them glancing at each other diagonally across the pews. "I'd be out," he thinks. "It would cost me the church. They'd gradually, delicately ease me out, help me make 'other arrangements.' I'd get shipped off to some church with a sign out front that tallies up the number saved on a Sunday, the kind of church that has buses..." (p. 21).

What do we expect the voice of God to sound like? In the movies it's kind of a running joke that God sounds like James Earl Jones or Morgan Freeman. Certainly not like me. Tony Pappas has a voice-of-God voice, but not me. My speech teacher in seminary said, "Mr. Hollaway, that was a wonderful interpretation of the text, but you have one problem: you have no voice. It's like playing a Beethoven sonata on a dime store piano." But maybe the voice of

God sounds like something else. Maybe George Burns, or in an animated movie, Jerry Garcia, or Alan Rickman in *Dogma*. Or maybe God takes on many different voices as in the TV show *Joan of Arcadia*. Or maybe it's your voice. I remember being startled back in 1995 when I watched the TV movie of *Moses* starring Ben Kingsley; when God spoke out of the burning bush, it was with Moses' own voice.

When God speaks to us in real life, I think he usually does speak to us with our own voice, our inner voice. When we communicate with another person, it doesn't usually work just to try to plant an idea in the other person's head by thinking it—although I swear Becca does that some time! Usually we humans have to communicate by using our vocal cords to make the air vibrate, and these waves travel through the medium of air until they hit the other person's eardrum, which sets up a corresponding vibration, which is picked up by nerves in the ear and carried to the brain, where it is interpreted as language and translated into meaning. But if you are God, you don't have to do that. You can communicate with humans directly. You just place an idea in a person's mind. Sometimes it might be interpreted as a voice; sometimes the person might wonder "Where did that come from?" Or you might just think it's your imagination. In George Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan*, one of the generals asks the 15-year-old Joan of Arc how she knows the voices she hears are not her imagination. She replies, "Of course they are my imagination! How else should God speak to us?"

A philosophy professor at the University of Southern California, Dallas Willard, wrote a helpful book with the title *Hearing God* [Inter Varsity Press, 1999]. He discusses how God sometimes speaks in conjunction with natural phenomena, or through angels, or through dreams and vision, or through a messenger or prophet. But, he says, the preferred and most valuable way God speaks to us is through what the Bible calls the "still, small voice" or "the voice of silence" [p.99] "God comes to us precisely in and through our thoughts, perceptions, and experiences[;] he can approach our conscious life *only* through them, for they are the substance of our lives" [p. 102].

So God speaks to us through our own thoughts, and yet we recognize, somehow, that the voice is not our own. We sense—intuitively—that it is God speaking to us. Perhaps not at first, like Samuel. We may think it is our parents, or the pastor, or a book putting that idea in our heads. But eventually we may recognize it as God. When Jesus talks about being the good shepherd in John 10, he says "the sheep follow him because they know his voice." The great missionary to India E. Stanley Jones wrote about how to tell the difference between the subconscious and the voice of God. "Perhaps the rough distinction is this: The voice of the subconscious argues with you, tries to convince you; but the inner voice of God does not argue, does not try to convince you. It just speaks, and it is self-authenticating" [*A Song of Ascents: A Spiritual Autobiography*, Abingdon, 1968, p. 190].

Sometimes we are quite sure it is *not* our own idea because it is not what we want to hear. That's what happens in the story of Samuel. When Samuel listens, God speaks and tells him that God's judgment is going to fall on the family of his mentor and foster father Eli. Eli's sons have desecrated the sanctuary and defrauded the people. A prophet has already told Eli in chapter 2 that his sons would die and his priestly line was at an end, but Samuel knows nothing of this. Samuel is heartbroken and afraid after he hears God speak and he is not about to tell Eli. But Eli says he will curse Samuel if he doesn't tell him what Yahweh said to him. So Samuel spills it, and Eli says, "It is Yahweh. No doubt about it. Let him do what seems good to him."

Why do we not hear God speaking to us more often? I don't think it's because God has stopped communicating, or because we have the Bible and don't need to hear from him anymore. I think it's because we are not listening. The way men stop listening to their wives. When Becca

finally convinced me years ago to have my hearing checked, the audiologist said, “You have a type of hearing loss typical of middle aged men: it is precisely in the frequency range of women’s voices.” But here’s the thing: we don’t just stop listening to our wives; we stop listening to our lives. The Quaker writer Parker Palmer has a wonderful book called *Listen to Your Life*. That’s how you will hear the voice of God.

I have a hunch that the main reason we don’t hear God speaking is because we don’t have enough silence in our lives. That’s when Samuel hears God: when everything is quiet, when he’s lying on his pallet. Why is it that God speaks to so many people in that little window between waking and sleeping? It’s simple: it’s the only time that most people have any silence in their lives.

Every January *Poets & Writers* magazine has an issue dedicated to the topic of inspiration. I was reading it this week, and this very question of silence comes up—especially now that so much information, so many messages are available all day to us, even to a writer sitting all alone at his computer. Many writers have to get an internet-free computer to work on or buy software that shuts off your access to the internet for a specific period of time. The magazine quotes the novelist Doris Lessing:

Writer are often asked ‘How do you write? With a word processor? An electric typewriter? A quill? Longhand?’ But the essential question is, ‘Have you found a space, that empty space, which should surround you as you write.’ [p.3]

That empty space is what we need if we are going to hear God.

I once heard Paul Brand, a British neuropsychiatrist, talk to a group of medical students. He had worked with NATO on the problem of drug abuse among soldiers. What he learned was that the brain has a kind of gateway in the hypothalamus through which all messages must enter, and only so much can get through. If you burn your finger on a stove, you scream and jump around because those actions create other stimuli that block the pain impulses from getting through the gateway. The voice of God has to use the same gateway. The doctor said that this is why soldiers were using drugs. Normally they could not hear God because so many stimuli were coming through the gateway, but when they took certain drugs they muffled all those other stimuli and made it possible to shut out the noise and make contact with something that felt like God. People are using drugs, he said, as a substitute for silence. The best thing we could do to prevent drug abuse would be to teach people to “be still and know that I am God.”

But we are used to all the noise. When Becca and I moved from Broadway in Manhattan to a quiet suburb in New Jersey, our five year old Sarah couldn’t sleep. She said, “It’s too quiet!” We are accustomed to noise, and we depend on it to keep us from facing the hard questions or hearing God’s voice. I like the fun gospel song called “Turn Your Radio On,” about listening to the signals God is broadcasting all the time, but we probably need another song called “Turn Your Radio Off.” And your television. And your computer. And your smart phone.

Even on Block Island, life can be noisy. I came here partly for the silence, and like many of you I love the winter for the quiet. But I still manage to fill my time with everything but listening quietly for the voice of God. Even in the church office, I fill my thoughts with local politics and phone calls and budget questions and emails. God doesn’t have a chance. I’ve made a decision this week to do what I have known I should do for quite some time, but I’ve been chicken to do it. I’m going to stay out of my office until noon and sit at my bare kitchen table listening and writing and seeking inspiration. I’ll get my church work in, don’t worry; I work 6 or 7 days a week anyway and work most nights. But I’ve got to create some empty space for listening to God and listening to my life. Both prayer and writing require listening and paying

attention. The Quaker writer Howard Macy said, “To approach God with only an incessant stream of words is a filibuster, not a prayer” [*Rhythms of the Inner Life*, Revell, 1988, p. 51].

In Shaw's *Saint Joan*, the king is upset because he doesn't hear the voices. He says to Joan, “Why do I not hear your voices? Am I not the king? Should they not be speaking to me instead of to you, a simple peasant girl?” Joan answers, “My Leige, you too can hear them, but you must learn to listen. Listen after the trilling of the angelus bells. In the stillness, after the bells have ceased, listen, and then, my Leige, you too will hear the voices.”

Tomorrow we celebrate the life of a Baptist saint, Martin Luther King, Jr. We usually think of him as a man of action, who took bold stands for justice. But Dr. King, too, needed to hear the voice of God. There was a night in Montgomery early in his career that he sat late into the night drinking coffee at his kitchen table. He had been through a bitter time; he received terrible criticism and even death threats. He was deeply discouraged, scared, on the edge of giving up the fight for integration and equality. But in that moment at the kitchen table, Dr. King said he heard a voice, clear as any voice he ever heard, saying “Martin, stand up for justice, stand up for the truth” and he said it sounded like the voice of Jesus, “And he promised to never leave me.” Dr. King rose from that table with newfound courage and carried out his mission.

What do you need to hear from God? What does God want to say to you? Are you listening? Will you respond?