

Listen!

1 Samuel 3:1-10
January 15, 2012

Listen ...

It's hard to just listen, isn't it? It makes us uncomfortable. It makes us self-conscious.

But that's the point! Listening does make us self--conscious ... self-conscious, self-aware. When we listen, we are conscious of ourselves and we are conscious of each other, not distracted by all the noise and all the commotion around us. When we listen, we see ourselves, we see each other, not in the context of whatever it is we are doing or whatever it is we are talking about, but simply as we are. We see ourselves as we are, not protected by layers of conversation and activity, but as we are, naked and exposed.

Have you ever been talking with someone who is good at making eye contact? You are looking into each other's faces, talking about this or that and then the conversation goes quiet, but you're still looking into each others' eyes. Whoa! Talk about naked and exposed! I don't know what you do in that situation, but usually I quickly divert my eyes or think of something, anything, to say!

Listening makes us conscious, acutely conscious, of ourselves and of each other ... and of God. When we are quiet, when we listen, we create space for the Lord. It's not that the Lord hasn't been there all along, amidst all the activity and all the mundane conversations, but when we listen, when we pay attention, we may be able to hear the Lord speak ... to us.

When Samuel spoke, all Israel listened ...

That's what the Bible says, the last verse of the chapter from which we read --
1 Samuel 3:21.

When Samuel spoke, all Israel listened ...

Do you want to know why?

Samuel was a key figure in early Jewish history. He deserves to be ranked with Abraham and Moses who came before him, and with David and Elijah who came after him.

Samuel lived at a critical time in Israel's history. Under the leadership of Moses and Joshua, the people of Israel had made the long journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom and opportunity in the promised land of Canaan, but their first two hundred years in the land were marked by turmoil and violence and anarchy.

They were constantly under attack by surrounding tribes, Canaanites and Midianites and Philistines, but they also fought amongst themselves.

They largely abandoned the covenant the Lord made with them at Sinai, worshipping instead the local deities, Baal and Asherah, and adopting the cruelty and debauchery and lawlessness of their neighbors.

There was no king among the Hebrews and little sense of common identity or loyalty. The book of Judges summarizes this period in Israel's history this way:

There was no king in Israel at that time. Everyone did whatever they pleased.

But Samuel came along and all Israel listened! Samuel was their judge, settling disputes among the people. Samuel was their leader, calling on God, as Moses did, to protect them and defend them. Samuel was their prophet, calling on the people to turn from their idolatry, to turn from their wicked ways, to return to the Lord, to return to faithfulness to the way of the Lord.

Samuel paved the way for the nationhood of Israel, appointing and anointing its first kings, Saul and David, at the Lord's direction. Without Samuel, there would have been no David. Without Samuel, there may not have been a nation to be led by a David. When Samuel spoke, all Israel listened.

Do you want to know why?

Samuel almost wasn't. His mother, Hannah, was childless. Every year she made the trip to Shiloh to offer sacrifice to the Lord with her husband and the wife who had given him children, and every year she cried bitter tears and prayed to the Lord to give her a son. She made the Lord a promise:

If you give me a son, I promise that I will dedicate him to you for his whole life.

The Lord answered her prayer and Samuel was born to her. And Hannah kept her promise. Once Samuel was weaned, she took her young son to Shiloh and left him there in the care of Eli, the priest.

Eli was a good man, but a weak man. His sons, Hophni and Phineas, who served as priests with him, were cruel and corrupt, using their religious authority to enrich themselves at the people's expense and Eli was powerless to stop them. Eli didn't do anything, didn't even try to do anything, to rein them in.

It is remarkable, utterly remarkable, that Samuel, growing up in that household, serving alongside Hophni and Phineas and Eli, surrounded by unchallenged hypocrisy and unfettered greed and spineless leadership, would prove to be a man of such integrity, such a staunch and unwavering defender of the Lord and the Lord's covenant. Samuel did not cheat. He did not oppress. He did not take advantage, but remained faithful to the Lord and to the Lord's people, praying for them, teaching them, warning them, urging them to honor and serve the Lord with all their hearts.

Do you want to know why?

Do you want to know why Samuel was who he was? Do you want to know why Samuel proved to be such an effective and faithful leader of God's people, despite the obstacles? Do you want to know why all Israel listened when Samuel spoke?

Because Samuel listened!

"Samuel! Samuel!" the Lord called out to him. And Samuel answered: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

All Israel listened to Samuel because Samuel listened ... to the Lord!

Do you want people to listen when you speak? Do you want people to value what you have to say? Do you want people to value your wisdom and your leadership and your integrity? Do you want to know who you are and to feel good about who you are? Do you want to be confident of your own good sense, your own integrity, your own faith?

Then listen! Listen for the Lord's voice. Speak, Lord, your servant is listening!

You have to listen carefully, deliberately, because the world is noisy. How do you distinguish the Lord's voice amidst all the rocking and rapping and crooning, the tweeting and face-booking and you-tubing, the netflixing and tivo-ing and video-gaming, the newscasting and ad-pitching and public service announcement-making, the speeching and preaching and teaching, the chatting and tattling and gossiping, all the words and all the images and all the stuff that fill every day, every minute of our lives?

You have to be quiet. You have to shut up. You have to turn it off. You have to listen.

You have to listen carefully, deliberately, attentively, because there are other voices competing for your attention. Voices that sound wise, but lack the wisdom that comes from the Lord. Voices that sound good, but lack the goodness that is rooted in the Lord. Voices that tell you to go and do it for yourself, voices that tell you to go and get it for yourself, but when you do do it, when you do get it, you are left wondering who and what you really are.

You have to listen carefully, deliberately, attentively. You have to listen for the Lord's voice. You have to wait for the Lord to speak. Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.

But what if you listen ... and hear nothing?

What if you are listening -- listening and waiting and paying attention -- and the Lord says nothing? Sometimes that happens. Sometimes God is silent, or, at least, sometimes it seems to us that God is silent. Even the book of Samuel says that in that day messages from the Lord were few and visions from the Lord were rare.

But we are not living in that day. God spoke to our ancestors, at various times and in various ways, many times in many ways, but in these last days, God has spoken to us through his Son.

God has spoken to us -- God is speaking to us -- through his Son! So listen! Listen to Jesus! If you want to hear the Lord's voice, listen to Jesus. Jesus is not silent. Jesus has something to say. Jesus has something to say ... to you.

Listen ...