

McCabe United Methodist Church

Part 6, Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visions & Divine Encounters:
2017 Summer Series

Recognizing God's Voice

Sermon on 1 Samuel 3:1-21 (7/15 & 7/16/17)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

Almighty God, thank you for these Ghost stories. Thank you for the ways you have visited us. Thank you for the mysterious ways we encounter you in this life. Now, receive these words I speak. May they be acceptable and pleasing to you; in Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

“The pastor was writing her sermon in the study. Her young daughter said to her, 'Mommy, does God tell you what to say?' 'Yes, honey,' the pastor replied to her daughter, 'God tells me what to say.' Her daughter paused a moment, furrowed her little brow, and asked her mother, 'Then why do you scratch some of it out?’”

A graduate school professor of mine shared that little joke on my Facebook page the other day and I just love it. *“If God tells you what to say, then why do you scratch some of it out?”* This punchline is sort of in the “out of the mouths of babes” category because, as children so often are, the punchline of this little story is both simple and profound.

“If God tells you what to say, then why do you scratch some of it out?”

It's the punchline of a cute, little story about a preacher... but there's truth in this punchline no matter who we are or what our calling in life.

God communicates with each of us, we interpret what God is communicating, and then we take action accordingly (or we *don't* take action – as the case may be). Sometimes we get it right, while other times, we have to scratch out what we *thought* God said... and then we try again, listening a little bit more closely the next time.

As we wander through our summer sermon series, each Bible story we're exploring is *something* about God communicating with human beings. *Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visions and Divine Encounters*.

It's a series about God communicating through visions – and visions always require careful interpretation – and it's about God communicating through particular encounters, through particular moments of contact between God and humans. And today's story is a perfect example.

Our Scripture reading from First Samuel chapter 3 is one of many biblical “call” stories we're exploring in the midst of this *Ghost Stories* series. And, when I say, “biblical *call* stories,” what I mean is that, within the story, God *calls someone* to a particular task or vocation.

Last week, Pastor Mark preached on the passage of Scripture that includes the story of God calling to Moses out of a burning bush. Moses was in the wilderness, tending a flock of sheep one day, when the angel of the Lord appeared to him within the flames of a burning bush: the bush was on fire, but it was not being consumed by the holy flames.

As Moses approached the burning bush, the angel of Lord spoke about how God was calling *him* to go to Egypt and to lead his fellow Hebrew people out of slavery and into freedom in their own land. It was quite the call! And, as we humans are prone to doing when we are called to a seemingly insurmountable task, Moses protested at first, offering excuses for why he was not the one to accept this calling.

But, as the story goes, Moses eventually accepted God's call... and he did, in fact, lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and toward freedom in their own land.

Today, we heard a different sort of call story: the call of the prophet Samuel. And, while it *is* a story of God calling someone to a particular task or vocation, it is a very different sort of call story than the story of Moses and the burning bush. Whereas the burning bush was a powerfully *dramatic* sort of communication tool for Moses, God was a bit more... *subtle*... with Samuel.

Before diving into the actual story, however, it's important to know a little backstory on the characters we encounter in First Samuel 3.

First Samuel 3 includes two human characters: Samuel and Eli. Eli was the priest at a place called Shiloh. Every year, many people would make pilgrimage to Shiloh to bring thank offerings for the Lord. Among those people was the family of a man named Elkanah¹. Elkanah had a wife named Hannah who was barren for much of their marriage.

As you might imagine, her barrenness was a source of deep sadness for Hannah. One year, when their family went to Shiloh to make their thank offerings to the Lord, Hannah also offered a desperate prayer to God that she would be given a child. As part of her prayer, she promised that, if God granted her a child, she would give her child back to the Lord as her own thank offering.

The priest Eli encountered Hannah as she prayed and he assured her that the Lord would likely grant her request. As providence would have it, the Lord *did* answer Hannah's prayer, and her son Samuel was born within a year.

Hannah kept Samuel with her as long as she was nursing him. Then, when Samuel was a weaned toddler, the family went back to Shiloh to give God their yearly thank offering... and Hannah left her precious son with Eli at Shiloh. Samuel was her gift from God, and she gave him *back* to God in thanksgiving.

Though it's not the purpose of my message today, it is worth mentioning Hannah's extreme gratitude. I mean, how many of us, when given a gift we have longed for in the depths of our being, when finally given that gift, how many of us would choose to cling tightly to it with all our strength for as long as we possibly could? If I'm being completely honest, that's what I would do.

Yet Hannah clung to her precious child for only a couple of years. *Her* gratitude inspired *her* to give her gift back to God. Most days I could only

¹ Elkanah is pronounced el-KAY-nuh <http://www.netministries.org/resources/resource-pronunciation-guide>

dream of having that level of gratitude and trust. Hannah offers us a beautifully difficult challenge.

Please tuck Hannah and her gratitude into a corner of your mind and heart: she is deeply important... but she is not the focus of today's message. See, today's reading from First Samuel chapter 3 is the story of how God called Hannah's precious child *Samuel* to become a prophet.

Today's reading from First Samuel chapter 3 feels, in some ways like a long, semi-obnoxious knock-knock joke. Kind of like the classic,

“Knock-knock. [\[Who's there?\]](#) Banana. [\[Banana who?\]](#)
Knock-knock. [\[Who's there?\]](#) Banana. [\[Banana who?\]](#)
Knock-knock. [\[Who's there?\]](#) Banana. [\[Banana who?\]](#)
Knock-knock. [\[Who's there?\]](#) Orange. [\[Orange who?\]](#)
Orange you glad I didn't say ‘banana’?”

In our story from First Samuel 3, God calls to Samuel *three times* before he realizes it was God calling to him. As the story goes, when Samuel was still rather young, serving as a helper to Eli the priest at Shiloh, the Lord called Samuel's name when Samuel was almost asleep (knock-knock!).

Samuel thought it was Eli calling to him, so he ran to Eli, asking what Eli wanted. Eli said he hadn't called him and told Samuel to go back to bed. The Lord called Samuel's name *again* (knock-knock!) and Samuel *again* went to Eli, thinking it had been Eli who had called to him.

When this happened a third time, Eli realized it was God who was calling to Samuel. See, Samuel had not yet learned to recognize God when God was communicating with him. So, Eli said to Samuel,

“Go back and lie down. If someone speaks to you again, answer, 'I'm listening, Lord. What do you want me to do?’” So, Samuel did this. And, of course, the Lord spoke to him a fourth time (knock-knock!). That time, Samuel recognized the voice as God's. So, he said, “I'm listening. What do you want me to do?”

At this point, I could launch into a message about how God often calls us to do really difficult things... scary things... things we'd really rather not even *think* about doing. I could launch into a message about that because that's exactly what happened to Samuel. (Sort of like it happened to Moses before him.)

God's message for Samuel was that Samuel needed to relay some pretty terrible information: information about how God was going to discipline Eli's family for generations because of the way Eli's sons disrespected the Lord and disrespected the offerings people brought to the Lord.

God asked Samuel to relay this word to Eli. But Eli was Samuel's mentor. Of course, he didn't *want* to relay this message.

No one wants to be the bearer of bad news. He knew it would be devastating to Eli. But Eli wanted to know what God's message for Samuel had been... so, Samuel told him.

Eli was a deeply faithful man who had a passionate relationship with the Lord, so, while it was surely devastating to hear, Eli accepted God's word for him and his family. "*He is the Lord,*" Eli said after Samuel had shared the message. "*He will do what is right.*"

Faith and trust. Something like Hannah's. And through Samuel's divine encounter, the Lord knew Samuel was a willing listener... and a willing messenger. A prophet was born.

As I've reflected on this passage of Scripture in recent weeks, the question that has not escaped my spirit is this:

How do we learn to recognize God's voice?

Samuel was under Eli's tutelage at Shiloh. And Eli was a mentor who was familiar with the Lord; Eli had lived his life in communication with God. Eli was there to help Samuel learn to recognize God's voice.

Interestingly enough, that's the way it goes for many of us, too.

Earlier this week I took to Facebook to find out how those in my Facebook circle know when God is communicating with them. I was so grateful for the many sincere and honest responses. And, of the dozens of responses I got, themes definitely emerged:

- ✚ Many folks said they knew God was communicating with them when a particular thought continued to pop into their mind – often starting small, then, until they respond to the thought, it continues to grow in their mind.

These folks suggested they knew the thought was from God when the message was also communicated in other ways – through music, through a conversation with a friend, through something they were reading, through a Scripture verse they encountered repeatedly.

- ✚ Other folks talked about knowing God was communicating with them at their “gut” level... in the depths of their being... often in a way that wasn't entirely explainable.

- ✚ A couple of others used interesting metaphors to explain times when they knew God was communicating with them: one person said something about feeling like God was smacking them with a 2 by 4, that they were supposed to do a particular thing or go a particular way.

- ✚ Another used a slightly less painful metaphor, saying they would feel like God had “poked a hole in their heart,” leaving a space they needed to fill with whatever it was God was calling them to do – whether it was following a certain path in life or reaching out to help in an area of need.

- ✚ Finally, many, *many* people mentioned that, when God spoke to them in relation to something going on in their life, a sense of peace washed over them... as though the final answer or direction had been communicated.

The good news of today's Scripture from First Samuel chapter 3 is that God *does* call us... God *does* communicate with us. Just as God communicated with Hannah. Just as God communicated with Eli. And just as God communicated with Samuel.

Where we need direction, God will offer it. Where we need challenge, God will extend it. Where we need comfort, God will give it.

Again, the good news is that God *does* call us... God *does* communicate with us. We simply need to learn to recognize God's voice when God is speaking. Let us pray.

Almighty God, powerful Savior, persistent Holy Spirit, thank you for the many and varied ways you speak to us in this life. Thank you for these ghost stories – these biblical tales in which you come so near to others, and these tales of our own brothers and sisters in Christ in which you communicate your presence so mysteriously. When you speak, help us to listen. When you call, help us to answer. And through our listening and answering, may we bring blessing to this world you love. We pray in the name of your precious Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen