

The Voice

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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Some of you will be familiar with the NBC TV show “The Voice,” where a small handful of celebrity judges – folks like Blake Shelton, Kelly Clarkson, John Legend, Gwen Stefani – sit in really big chairs, facing away from the stage where a series of contestants come on stage to sing. If the celebrity judges like what they hear, they press a big button which spins their chair around, so they can see who they’ve picked. The concept is that the judges are supposed to pick, based not on what their eyes see, but on what they hear. Once judges are matched up with their chosen contestants, they then coach, mentor, and train their contestants in singing and in using their voice.

When I read our story from 1 Samuel 3, I found myself thinking about The Voice TV show, though there are some key differences. The chief difference, of course, is that the “voice” in question in the story is the voice of God, not of a contestant, and while the old priest Eli mentors and trains the young boy Samuel, as the celebrity judges do on the show, the training is not in how Samuel should use his *own* voice, but in how he should *listen* for the voice of God and then respond to it.

One valuable way to learn to read the Bible is to look for ‘pivot points’ in the story of the Bible, where the plot of the Bible makes a turn. The birth of Jesus is a major pivot point in how Christians read the Bible, as is his crucifixion, as is his resurrection. These are points where the plot of the story moves forward and goes in a new direction from where things would have been going otherwise.

We can do the same thing, with looking at *our lives* for the pivot points. I flew down this past week to visit my mom outside of Charlotte, and on the plane ride down, I got into a conversation with a guy who was telling me about several points where his life changed direction. When he got divorced; when he decided to follow his dad into the family business in Connecticut; when he remarried; when he got a call from someone who wanted to buy out his business, which has allowed him to retire and now he can work on a couple of Corvettes that he keeps in the garage. Some of the pivot points in our lives are painful, some of them are surprising, all of them go together to make up the story - the narrative - that God is writing with our lives.

1 Samuel 3 is situated at one such pivot point in the story of Israel. Prior to 1 Samuel, the people of Israel have been organized, not as a nation with a king, but as a confederation of tribes, governed by judges. While on the one hand, this spared Israel from the temptation to aggregating power that a centralizing government represents, on the other hand, things were a whole lot more chaotic. The verdict at the end of the

book of Judges, in chapter 21, is concise and devastating: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own eyes." When everyone does what is right in their own eyes, you get a recipe for chaos and anarchy.

The boy Samuel would go on to play a major role in gathering and organizing governmental power in Israel, he would grow up to anoint the first kings of Israel, Saul and then David, setting Israel on a new trajectory, which would lead in the fullness of time to the King referred to in the New Testament as the son of David, the one we acclaim as Lord, Jesus of Nazareth. That new trajectory begins with our text today. Our text today is a pivot point, which eventually leads to Jesus. And this trajectory begins with Samuel hearing a voice, hearing the word of the Lord, calling his name.

In our story, little Samuel is sensitive and responsive to God's voice. He gets up in the middle of the night when he hears his name called. He's sensitive to the voice, but he is untrained, and he doesn't know how to recognize God's voice. The old priest Eli, on the other hand, is well-trained, but he – and even more, his sons – are rather compromised morally to the point that they are virtually unresponsive to God's voice. Up until this point in 1 Samuel, Eli has not been a terribly sympathetic character. In our text, Samuel growls at young Samuel a couple of times for waking him up in the middle of the night. Not exactly a warm and friendly presence.

But on the 3rd time, something shifts for Eli, and he somehow discerns that the voice young Samuel is hearing is the voice of the Lord. The verses immediately following our text show us that the message that the Lord gives to Samuel is a devastating message of massive judgment against Eli and his crooked sons. But even though the message is painful, old Eli accepts and honors the voice. Eli - even with all of his moral compromise - mentors and teaches Samuel how to listen for God's voice. Samuel learns much from Eli; he learns powerfully how to recognize God's voice, and he learns what the costs can be for bearing God's voice into the world.

When we open up the second story that Linton read for us today, we get a big, additional clue about listening for the voice of the Lord, which is that the voice of the Lord will come to us through our neighbor, and especially our neighbor whom we are mostly inclined to dismiss. In 1 Samuel 3, the voice of the Lord comes to Samuel in a rather mysterious way, in the middle of the night. Perhaps Samuel hears it in a dream, perhaps it is in an inner voice that resounds in Samuel's chest or his heart or his mind, perhaps it is actually in an audible voice that comes to him from the beyond. God still speaks in those somewhat intangible ways.

But in John 1, Jesus is the voice of the Lord. Jesus finds Philip and tells Philip to follow him. Then Philip goes and finds Nathanael and tells him what has happened. "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." I have begun to think of Nathanael as the patron saint of all of us who are learning to recover from one form of prejudice or another. Nathanael

sneers and says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" You can practically hear Nathanael talking about "those people." "Those people can't do anything." "I can't stand those people."

The New Testament teaches us that the voice of the Lord belongs to Jesus. But the New Testament also teaches us that Jesus comes to us in the guise of the neighbor and the stranger and the enemy. "Where two or three are gathered in my name," Jesus says, "I am there among them." The New Testament teaches us that we encounter Jesus in the least of these, which means that the presence and the voice of the Lord comes to us through the neighbor, and perhaps especially the neighbor whom we are inclined to dismiss. I wish I had a dollar for every time someone has told me about how they have experienced the voice of God coming to them through something someone else said to them. One person says, "I was sitting in a coffee shop, and this guy comes up to me, and out of nowhere, he said a kind word to me, and it changed the direction of my entire day." Another person says, "I was unloading some troubles that I'm going through to a friend, and they listened to me, and asked me a question, and it somehow unlocked what I needed to do."

But it also happens that, on occasion, the word from the Lord comes through a person or a group that was unexpected and really kind of discounted. Someone who just seemed to be offensive and aggravating and who represented so many things that were just wrong, all of a sudden turns out to say, or to do, something that breaks your heart right open and blesses you in a very tender way.

This of course happens to Nathanael in our text, which is why I think of him as the patron saint of those of us who are learning to recover from our prejudice, because he shows himself to have a teachable heart after all. The voice of the Lord speaks directly to Nathanael, and something inside of Nathanael breaks open, and he practically falls on his knees and says, "Rabbi, you are the son of God. You are the King of Israel!"

Friends, the good news of our texts today is that the Lord will speak to you in your life. People sometimes say to me, "The Lord never speaks to me like other people." It almost feels as though they feel rejected or ignored by God. It almost feels like that opening line in 1 Samuel 3, which you may have noticed, where it says, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days." They were not hearing the voice of God very much. But then in our story, they did. Samuel heard the voice, but he needed Eli to help him learn that it was God's. We each need an Eli who will help us learn to recognize God's voice. And each of us is called to be an Eli for other people, to help them learn to recognize God's voice. We need to help each other. All the while, bearing in mind our ancestor Nathanael, who did not think the voice of God could come out of Nazareth, until it did. May we each grow in our knowledge and our experience of God, in all of the pivot points of our lives. To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.