

MAKING CHOICES... TAKING RISKS

“A Late-Night Call”

Sample Sermon

Written by Michael Cheuk,
Farmville Baptist Church, Farmville, VA



NRSV 1 Samuel 3:1-10: Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. 2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 3 the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. 4 Then the LORD called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” 5 and ran to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down. 6 The LORD called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. 8 The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. 9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

They were living in dark times. In the days when the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli, they were living in dark times. The twelve Hebrew tribes had settled in the Promised Land, but things looked anything but promising.

After the death of Joshua, the tribes were besieged from the outside by enemies like the Moabites, Midianites, and Canaanites. Now, the Philistines were multiplying in number and in power, and they were masters of the region. But the Hebrew tribes did not just have to contend with outside enemies; they also had to deal with internal discord. The tribes were bickering among themselves. They had no unity. What’s worse, they were chasing after Canaanite gods, and their disobedience and infidelity brought bitter consequences. Things would get so bad that from time to time the people would cry out to God for help, and God would raise up a leader to straighten things out. But once things got better, the Hebrew people would fall back to their old, rebellious ways where all the people did what was right in their own eyes.¹ No wonder the word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread. They were living in dark times.

In those days, there lived a priest named Eli. He was a long-time priest in a long line of priests going all the way back to Aaron, Moses’ brother. Eli was old and his eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see. One gets a feeling that his failing eyesight was not just a matter of his advanced age or macular degeneration. In the previous chapters of first Samuel, we see that Eli also lacked spiritual vision and that he more or less turned a blind eye to his sons’ gross misconduct. We’re told that Eli’s sons, in line to inherit his role as priest, were wicked, corrupt and immoral. They brought upon themselves and the priesthood distrust, disgrace and disgust. But Eli only half-heartedly reprimanded them, and his tepid rebukes were to no avail—the sons took no heed of the old man. No wonder the word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread. They were living in dark times.

Yet a glimmer of hope flickers. During the waning hours of the night, when it was darkest just before the dawn, the lamp of God still burned in the temple and it had not yet gone out. As a son of Aaron, Eli was required to keep the

Key Passage: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

lamps burning in the temple throughout the night until morning.² But Eli was not tending to the lamp; he was lying in a dark outer room of the temple. Instead, that duty rested upon a boy named Samuel, who was lying next to the Ark of God, near the very presence of God, in the inner chamber of the temple, where the light of the lamp of God shone upon him.

Several years back, Samuel was brought to the temple by his mother Hannah when he was only about three years old. Before Samuel was born, Hannah was barren, and it was in this very temple that Hannah silently cried out to God for God to give her a son. She promised that if she conceived a son, she would give him to the Lord in permanent service. The Lord heard Hannah's prayer, and Hannah and her husband Elkanah had a baby boy. Hannah kept her promise and when Samuel was old enough to be weaned, she took her first-born son to the priest Eli so that Samuel could live and serve before the Lord for the rest of his life.

Now on this dark night, a voice called out: "Samuel!" Samuel thought Eli was calling, so he ran to him and said: "Here I am, for you called me." A sleepy and groggy Eli muttered, "I did not call; lie down again." But the voice summoned again in the darkness: "Samuel!" Again, Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Now a little more awake, Eli lovingly replied: "I did not call, my son; lie down again."

One can hardly blame the lad for not knowing who was calling. Oh, he certainly heard something, but Samuel did not yet know the Lord. And the knowledge required to recognize God's voice is like the personal, perceptive understanding that exists between a husband and a wife.³ Or between a son and a loving father. But like an orphaned child who hears someone calling his name for the first time but doesn't recognize the voice, Samuel ran to the only person, the only father figure, that he knew. But it was not Eli who called Samuel.

The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. By now, if I were Samuel, I would just assume that I was either being prank-called or that some sleepy dolt was dialing the same wrong number over and over again. Samuel picked up twice, but didn't recognize the voice, and didn't understand the words. There is a difference between hearing and listening. We hear with our ears; we listen with our brains. Hearing is simply the act of receiving sound by the ear. Listening however, requires concentration so that your brain perceives the words and sentences and processes their meaning.⁴ Hearing without listening is mere gibberish in the night. If you can hear but do not understand, you might as well be deaf. And poor Samuel was caught between this persistent caller and his inability to understand a word, for the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. And he didn't have the luxury of pulling the plug or putting the receiver off the hook.

So Samuel did the only thing he knew how to do. He went to Eli. By now, Eli was fully awake. Who could be calling Samuel? This child, who was more of a son to him than his own flesh and blood—who could be calling him at this time of night? And gradually, in the dark recesses of Eli's mind, a dying ember slowly rekindled to chase away the night that had been his constant companion for these many years. He wondered if the voice that Samuel heard was the same voice he also heard but had long since forgotten, a calling that now echoed faintly in his consciousness. He had experienced something like that years back. It was a voice simultaneously quiet but compelling, like a little child that silently tugged at you and wouldn't let go until you paid her some attention. And at that moment, the old priest who was blind briefly regained his spiritual vision, and he perceived, and he understood. Samuel had thought that he heard the voice of his priestly father. Instead, Eli now perceived that it was the voice of their Heavenly Father calling. It was the voice of God.

How ironic it was that the one who had ears to hear couldn't understand, while the one with blind eyes finally perceived. But even more ironic was the fact that at the moment that Eli finally perceived a word from the Lord, he realized that the calling was not for himself. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; God had not spoken for so long. And now all of a sudden, God spoke, but not to him. God spoke, but not to his sons. God was speaking to this boy, who was not from his priestly lineage. The mantle of responsibility—and power and prestige—was about to pass from Eli, the old, experienced priest, to this young, inexperienced lad.

I wonder how Eli felt? Used up? Washed up? Hurt? We don't know, for the Bible does not say. But in his moment of clear vision, perhaps Eli realized the fact that as long as a word from the Lord was being heard again, it was a good thing. And even though he was not the recipient of the word of God, he could still direct others to rightly perceive

God's voice, to receive God's word, and to respond to God's call. God was calling, and this meant that God had not abandoned the world in its darkest hour. God was not slumbering in the night. God was still at work calling people to join in God's mission. And so Eli responded with grace. He said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

It is the mysterious working of God's grace that could use even an old, blind and tired priest to point another to the call of God. In this sense, the aged Eli was not used up. Not washed up. Samuel needed Eli to train him in the ministry to the Lord. Without Eli, Samuel would not have known that the voice he was hearing was actually God's. Eli pointed the way for Samuel to hear and perceive God's call.

If God could use Eli to enable Samuel to receive the call of God, how much more so can God use God's followers today to point others to God's calling? Will we spend time teaching our Samuels about what it means for all of us to serve the Lord in the temple that is our church? Now more than ever, we need those experienced in the faith to help our Samuels to recognize the voice of God. Will we be on the lookout for those whom God may be calling into the ministry? Will we look for and receive with gratefulness the emerging leaders that God may place in our congregation? Will we accept them and love them as if they were our own children? Will we pass the mantle of responsibility and leadership on to them even if they may pronounce a word of God's judgment upon us, just as Samuel did later upon Eli and his sons?

I want to be very clear: this story is not about an age thing. This story isn't about senior adults transferring leadership responsibility to those younger. Because as Christians, we believe that no one is too old to have a vision from God. We believe that no one is too old to hear a call from God. For we remember in Acts, at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus' disciples to establish the church, Peter quotes the prophet Joel: "Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions."⁵ God's Spirit continues to make known God's will to young and old, male and female.

Furthermore, this story is not about how sharp your eyes are. Your physical vision may be deteriorating, but spiritual vision is not dependent upon your eyes. The Holy Spirit can open the eyes of your heart to see clearly God's will and plan for your life. Conversely, you may have 20/20 vision, and yet be blind to the vision that God wants to show you for your life and for the church. While we may not be physically blind, we may be spiritually near-sighted. We tell ourselves: "We want to see and hear and follow God's call, but I just can't see beyond my schooling. I'll wait until I graduate from high school or college." Or, "I just can't see beyond my kids. I'll just wait until they are grown." Or, "I just can't see beyond my job right now. I'll wait until I'm retired." While it's never too late to respond to God's call, too many times, we miss out on the fullness of God's plan for our lives because of our spiritual near-sightedness.

Finally, this story is not about physical hearing. You may not hear as well as you used to. But God does not need physical ears for you to hear God's call. Conversely, you may have perfect hearing. But, like Samuel, you may hear voices, but you may still not be able to perceive a word from God. In our culture, we are bombarded with many calls and messages—from telemarketers, commercials, pop-up ads, mailings. Like God, these calls are persistent, even relentless.

Unlike God's still small voice, they are loud, blaring, and in-your-face. So ubiquitous, they become part of the background noise of our lives, and when we hear these messages, we are tempted to run over and respond:

Money! Here I am, for you called me. Success! Here I am, for you called me.

Power! Here I am, for you called me. Security! Here I am, for you called me.

While Eli was at least honest enough to tell Samuel that he didn't call, money or success or power would gladly be your lord with you as their servant. But there is only one true Lord, and when God calls, will we hear God over the din of the other voices? And when we hear, will we listen? We need to listen, with our ears, yes, but even more so, with our hearts and minds so that we may perceive, understand and obey.⁶ God continues to call God's people to deeper levels of discipleship and to new areas of ministry. I hazard to guess that when it comes to the call of God, instead of being "hard of hearing," most of us are "hard of listening."⁷

Some say that we live in dark times today. We live in a society where many people do what's right in their own eyes. The church no longer occupies the same status and standing as before as a result of a changing culture, but also because of scandals, mismanagement, controversy and in-fighting within the church itself. Our clergy are getting older. Bright and talented young people no longer consider church ministry as an attractive vocation. And the word of the Lord is rare in these days; visions are not widespread even in some of our churches.

But I believe that the lamp of God has not yet gone out. It still flickers and burns in the night, searching, beckoning a new generation to take on the mantle of leading God's people. The Lord still comes and stands there, making late night calls.

Shh! Do you hear something? Is God calling out your name? We know how Samuel responded. How will you respond?

Benediction

*Go now and may God bless you and keep you as you go
with open ears, open eyes and open hearts . . .*

To hear the voice of God the Father

To see the vision of God the Son

To follow the call of God the Spirit . . .

in our lives, in our church and in our world. Amen.

Footnotes:

¹ Judges 17:6; 21:25.

² Exodus 27:21; cf. Leviticus 24:3, Numbers 18:23.

³ The Hebrew word for know (yada`) also means to perceive. It is the same word used in Genesis 4:1.

⁴ See www.melmartin.com/html_pages/Articles/listening.html for the distinction between hearing and listening.

⁵ Joel 2:28.

⁶ The Hebrew word for listening (shama`) also includes obedience as part of its meaning.

⁷ www.d.umn.edu/student/loon/acad/strat/ss_hearing.html