

October 17 – Samuel

You may have noticed that a lot of our readings lately have one of the characters say “Here I am.” When God called to Abraham in the binding of Isaac story, Abraham responded with here I am. Then, with his knife bearing hand over his son’s body, the angel says “Abraham” and he replied, Here I am.

When God called to Moses out of the burning bush, Moses’ response was Here I am.

In today’s story, Samuel says it four times to Eli.

The Hebrew word is Hineni.

This isn’t a response about location. It’s about being radically open to do what the caller wants. In the other stories, Abraham and Moses respond with Hineni to God. They know God is talking to them and, probably with some trepidation, they say here I am, God, ready to listen.

Today’s story has the similar call to the boy Samuel, but there is some confusion. Samuel has no clue it’s God. And it even seems to take Eli a couple times before he figures it out. Once they figure it out, Samuel too becomes open to hearing what God has to say.

That’s going to be our focus for this morning – how do we hear God? How do we know what we think we hear really is God?

First, let’s briefly set the historical stage here. This scene takes place at the end of the period of the Judges. The people of Israel at this point are not really a nation, at least in the political sense of the time. They are a loose confederation of the 12 tribes, led by tribal leaders called Judges. The book of Judges in the Bible is about this period.

At this point in Israel’s history, they have spiraled down into chaos, corruption, and evil. Most of the judges were corrupt. The refrain “everyone did what was right in their own eyes” echoes throughout the book. Everyone repeats the ancient sin of Adam and Eve – they want to be their own gods, judging good and evil for themselves.

A truly horrendous account of a gang rape of a woman who belonged to a Levite by a group of men from the tribe of Benjamin sparked a civil war.

Our story today says the word of God was rare in those days. No wonder. Even if God did speak, it would seem everyone was pretty oblivious to it. Instead, they went off on their own

paths. They neglected anything close to their call to be the blessing to the world God wanted them to be. At this point, that's a total joke.

But things are about to change. And God has chosen Samuel as the one through whom things will change.

Samuel is a child born to a barren woman whose prayers in the Temple for a child God finally answers. She has promised God that if she conceived a son, he would be dedicated to the Temple to serve there once he was weaned.

At this point, Samuel has lived at the Temple, serving and learning from Eli since he was about 3. He's still pretty young. Oddly, though, he did not seem to have learned about God and God's word has not yet been revealed to him. So when it does come, Samuel doesn't recognize it.

Finally, Eli figures it out and Samuel finally says, OK God, I'm listening.

And he gets an earful. One would hope the first time you hear from God, it would be a little gentler. But in a world stricken by chaos and conflict, in a world where everyone had their own truths and their own right and wrong, the time was right for God to speak a word that would begin to shatter life as it was.

Samuel will end up being the prophet who anoints first Saul, and then David as God's chosen King. Samuel will be the bridge between the confederacy of tribes and the united monarchy of Israel.

There are some fairly obvious similarities between where Samuel was in history and where we are. Let's talk for a minute first about what's different.

Jesus...Jesus is what's different. Jesus came as a human being to model the kind of blessing God wants us to be. Jesus rules as the king in David's line...but he rules in a very different way than kings typically did...a way of love.

And Jesus gave us the Spirit to dwell within us as individuals and as the church. God speaks to us through that Spirit. We don't have to be a priest or a prophet like Eli or Samuel for God to speak to us.

But we still can get confused. We still are uncertain when we think God is speaking. And sometimes whatever spirit we are listening to, it's not God.

So if we pull Samuel's story together with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, there are some clues to help us hear what God is saying...and help us to be more sure we are hearing God and not just a reflection of our own desires or just what we want to hear.

First, although the word of God might be spoken to individuals, it takes mentors and community to help us recognize God's voice. There are so many competing voices in our heads...voices from the internet, friends, family, political figures, and so on. Samuel had Eli.

We have our own mentors...spiritual guides, pastors, people in the congregation who have been steeped in the gospel for decades.

We live in a very individualistic society, and that has spilled over to this me and Jesus individual personal relationship as the chief structure of faith. But faith was never meant to be a solo adventure. In the New Testament, the church is the vehicle in which faith is learned and practiced...the community.

The world has at different times in history been profoundly impacted by people who think the evil they are doing is God's work. We need the community to give us a gut check when we think God is speaking to us.

Second, when we are trying to discern God's word as it pertains to something about which we know little, there are places we can go to learn more...experts...people who have spent a lifetime learning about their particular field.

When I was discerning the call to leave medicine and go to seminary, my spiritual director would talk about data collection. Sometimes God speaks through cold, hard, data.

For me, a simple overheard conversation about how seminaries were beginning to turn to online options opened a door that made seminary a much more realistic possibility as I learned more about how that might work.

Next, you should expect God to say things that you don't really want to hear...things that challenge your ideas...things that you may be called to speak up about that are scary. Samuel had to give his mentor...really this father figure...some really bad news.

But that bad news becomes the pivot on which Israel's history is changed. God continues to work to call Israel back to being the way God blesses the world. Eli's corrupt family, and the corrupt judges will have to get out of the way for God's future to open up.

That brings us to the final thing that helps us discern God's word. It will always be in some small or large way a way for God to bless the world...a way for love to break in.

That doesn't mean it will always seem warm and fuzzy. But it will bring justice where that's needed...it will bring love where there is hate...it will bring healing to a world torn apart. If

what you think you hear from God does not in some way bring love, justice, or healing, you're probably not on the right track.

And again, it will probably take some other voices of experience to help you see how what you're hearing either does or doesn't bring love, justice, or healing.

Our society is poised at a position not unlike that of Samuel's time. Those are often the times ripest for God's word to break in and turn things upside down.

We in the church may be the ones through whom God chooses to work...or we may be the community who surrounds and guides the ones through whom God chooses to work.

Either way, we are given the gift of the Spirit to be the people through whom God can bless the world.