

# Listening, Truth, and Relationship

By: Meagan McLaughlin

January 17, 2021. Pastor Meagan's sermon today is on the importance of listening to God and to one another, speaking the truth even when it's hard, and being in relation with and really seeing one another during this difficult time.

Readings: [1 Samuel 3:1-10 \[11-20\]](#), [Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18](#), [John 1:43-51](#)

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

Is anyone else feeling kind of overwhelmed and muddled in the last couple of weeks? It kind of feels like there is no end to the information, the emotion, the events, challenges that are presenting themselves at a pace that's almost impossible to keep up with. We talk about listening, and sometimes I wonder, how do we even begin to do that, where there is just so much coming our way all the time? And as I sat down to read the scriptures and prepare for Worship and to talk with you today, I struggled for a long time to focus on what God was saying to me, and to us, this week. However, you might know I am a firm believer, as Melissa pointed out, that no matter what is going on in the world — no matter what the confusion, no matter the emotions, no matter what — God will always speak to us through our scriptures. And there is no reason why today should be an exception. So, in the spirit of keeping things simple, there are three things that jumped out at me from our readings today that I think can help guide us as people of faith who are struggling to navigate an ever-more chaotic world.

The first is, as we've said, to listen to God — and to one another. I spoke with a family member a day or two after the events at the Capitol last week, to see how they were doing with all that had taken place. She shared the fear, the disillusionment, and the horror that we're all feeling, of course. But what really stands out from that conversation is a plea: we have to listen to one another. Everyone is upset, angry, frustrated, and feels left behind. We have to listen to one another.

And we are called to listen to God. In our reading from Samuel, we hear the story of a young person — Samuel was probably only about 12 years old — who was awakened by the voice of God. He didn't recognize it at first, but he heard it, and he did his best to respond saying, "Speak, your servant is listening." And we too are called to listen for the call of God in our lives. It says in the Samuel reading that the voice of God was rare in those days, but still God spoke to Samuel, and Samuel heard him. God has always spoken in many ways, throughout the scriptures — sometimes through a literal voice, a burning bush, angels, dreams, prophets, a rainbow in the sky.

God has spoken throughout history, and even into modern day. If you have seen the movie "Selma," you may remember that very profound scene where the marchers for justice arrive at the entrance to that bridge, and they pause when they see all of the police waiting there for them. And then, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, followed by all of the marchers behind him, knelt and bowed his head, seeking guidance from God as to what he should do next. Then he rose, and in silence he turned around and left the bridge. His fellow leaders were in disagreement about whether or not they should have done that, but Dr. King knew that God had called him, in that moment, to wait for another day. And we know the rest of that story — the day did come, and the marchers went to Selma to claim their rights as citizens and human beings.

And God still speaks to us today — through our scriptures, through the prophets of our time, through our neighbors, family, friends, and sometimes even through those we disagree with the most. And God

speaks to us in prayer, too. Where is God calling you, today? How is God speaking to you, in these most chaotic times?

The second thing that stood out to me in today's readings is that we're called to speak truth, and receive truth, even when it's hard. Young Samuel hears God's voice, and when he responds that he's listening, he is called to share the truth of sin and brokenness with Eli — his elder, his mentor, his adopted father. We know that Samuel was scared to do this, but Eli was ready and invited — even commanded — Samuel to tell him everything that God had said. So, Samuel tells Eli of God's anger at the way he has allowed his sons to act out of selfishness, greed, and abuse, disregarding the human dignity of those visiting the temple, and dishonoring the God whom they were to serve. Samuel shared the hard truth, and grew into a person who everyone knew they could trust. Eli heard the hard truth, owned the mistakes he had made, and he was changed.

Dr. King also told hard truths. He shared a vision of community where all lived with one another, seen and accepted as they are. And he said, to white religious leaders of good will who nevertheless criticized his actions, "I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's greatest stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Council or the Ku Klux Klan but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

That is what Dr. Martin Luther King wrote in his letter from the Birmingham Jail. And I hear this same hard truth from my colleagues and friends of color today: when we don't embrace the dignity, challenges, oppression, and pain of others, we do them violence, just as surely as if we wielded a weapon. We are called to speak hard truths, as Samuel did. And we are called to listen and receive hard truths when they are given to us, as Eli did.

The third thing that stood out to me in our readings today is that we're called to be in relationship, to see one another. We're together in this journey, of speaking and listening, called to fully see and know one another as fellow beloveds of God. Eli has been deaf to God, but when God persists in calling Samuel, Eli understands and can guide Samuel in how to listen for what God is saying. Samuel doesn't know it's God calling until Eli points it out. In our gospel today, having received an invitation from Jesus to come and get to know him, Philip invites Nathanael to join him. We hear in the reading that Nathanael is skeptical at first, wondering if anything good can come from this itinerant preacher from Nazareth. But Philip says, "Come and see." See for yourself who this Jesus is. Hear his words, get to know him, and then you can decide.

So Nathanael goes, and what he discovers is that Jesus really sees him. Jesus even sees his doubt, identifying Nathanael as a person in whom there is no deceit. And being seen, being known, and embraced as he is, transforms Nathanael.

Have you ever had a moment when you felt really seen or heard? What were the things that helped you to know you'd been seen? What did that feel like? I have been fortunate to have many people in my life who have seen me as I am. Those experiences of being fully seen and known have been some of the

most transformative times of my life. Seeing and hearing someone as they are is love at its best. When people have truly seen me, or heard what is in my heart, I've been able to see things in myself that I hadn't heard before, as they have shown me who God created me to be, and revealed what God is calling me to. The psalmist today sings of the God who knows us intimately, every part of us, from whom we cannot hide. And we are called to offer that gift to one another: the gift of seeing others as they are, letting God love them through us.

These are, I believe, prophetic words for our time. God is calling all of us to listen, to God and to one another, to speak and receive hard truths, and to be in deep relationship with one another and the God who created all of us. This is not easy, but it is our call, and we are not alone on this journey. Back to the story of Samuel, you may notice that God calls Samuel not just once, but three times. God didn't give up on Samuel, and he doesn't give up on us, either. God is calling us, and together we can hear the voice and respond: speak, your servant is listening.

Thanks be to God.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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