

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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*Huh?*

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*Let us pray . . .*

Whenever I enter the sanctuary alone - which is rarely due to the pandemic - but before that, I'd step inside and say out loud, "Hello, God" and then I'd answer, "Hello, Susie." While this exchange is a fun little thing I do with God, the spirit of it is in all sincerity. I have spent my life listening for God's voice and very often it is not what I had anticipated. Hold that thought.

You may recall our overview of The Book of Samuel from about a month ago during Advent. This Book, while divided into 2, was originally one long scroll. It's essentially about 3 main characters, Saul, David and our guy Samuel.

The Book of Samuel opens up with a story about Elkanah who has two wives, one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

Hannah, desperate to have children, feels the heaviness and emptiness of her situation as the years go by. On a particularly hard day, she goes to pray in Shiloh which was the major Israelite worship centre before the first Temple was built in Jerusalem. The story in chapter 1:9-17 says in a nutshell, that in her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. And she made a vow, telling God that if He would give her a son, she would devote the child's life to the Lord.

Eli the Priest watched Hannah praying, only she was praying in her heart, so her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk,

but Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord, praying out of my great anguish and grief."

Eli tells her to "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."

Hannah becomes pregnant, has a son, names him Samuel and when he is 3, she takes him to Shiloh and hands him over as she promised for the purposes of God and he goes under the care of Eli the Priest.

Hannah then lifts up her famous prayer known as Hannah's Song or Hannah's Poem, which essentially sings of the key themes in the Books of Samuel,

God opposing the proud and exalting the humble

And that despite human evil, God is at work and will raise up a

Messianic King.

Samuel grows up to become a great prophet and leader for the people of Israel.

But for this morning, our story finds him as a child, under the tutelage of an aging Priest Eli's care, learning to listen for or discern God's voice. In other words, knowing a true voice from a false one.

You've heard me preach on this before and this morning's lesson lends itself to a refresher on knowing God's voice from all others.

First of all, you will be surprised.

You will have a sense in your deep self, your gut which is the place of knowing in our bodies.

God will speak to you in repetitions — heck he called to Samuel 4 times before both he and Eli the Priest caught on.

God will talk to us through dreams and in coincidences. God might even speak to you through another person (tell OT story).

You won't necessarily like what you hear or even agree with it, but the point never was about necessarily agreeing with God — the point was always about knowing God's voice in order to be able to follow it and the things of God.

This work is important because it keeps us from wandering too far away from God where we are in danger of ending up listening to our own voices and agendas - which never leads to anywhere good.

And best of all, we can teach ourselves to listen for the Holy, which is to our advantage because God only has our best interests at heart. I believe that some of the ways in which we learn to hear God's voice are clues from our story:

Verse 1 tells us that *The Lord's word was rare at that time, and visions weren't widely known*. Perhaps another way to think of these words is as an affirmation that when you're starting out learning to discern God's voice, hearing it will be rare as your skills development.

Perhaps Samuel as a child is symbolic for learning to listen to and for God is so easy that even a child can do it.

Verse 7 is perhaps a reassurance that all good things in time *Now Samuel didn't yet know the Lord, and the Lord's word hadn't yet been revealed to him*. Beloveds, be assured that God is in partnership with us, revealing what we need as we go along through life and learn the voice of God.

I think God will also help make things kinda easy at times, as mentioned, God did call to Samuel 4 times before he caught on.

Also, like Samuel had Eli to help him, we too need spiritual companions to help us. Part of the training I am doing at the Alcyon Center this year is to learn this very thing of discerning God's voice in order to help our faith community.

In verse 10, Samuel lets God know he is listening, meaning he is present and receptive to and for the purposes of obeying or following God. The point of this line is to balance out the equation — when you learn to discern God's voice, then you have to listen to it in order to follow it.

The rest of the story about God wrathfully severing ties with Eli's household is for another sermon . . . but suffice it to say, that perhaps Eli the Priest had listened to and walked with God and God's ways for so long, that when

Samuel told him what God was going to do, Eli could hear the truth and accept God's voice — even when it must have been difficult.

So how do learn to hear God's voice? So that we learn to hear it for real and not as a false voice or as just a playful exchange as I have each time I go into the sanctuary alone?

We first of all believe that it is in fact available to us. We trust that God is trying to communicate with us all the time.

We spend time being quiet and taking a sabbath. This helps clear the clutter and noise of this earthly realm to make space for God's realm.

We move past the idea that language is words only. There are patterns and rhythms and other sounds and ways of knowing and understanding.

Therefore, I also suggest when you hear repetitions and have intense dreams or coincidences or when something gets your attention or curiosity in a different way, that you pay attention to those things and see what God might be saying.

Now, God needed Samuel to listen for and follow His voice in order to prophecy to the Israelites.

Since God doesn't need everybody to be a prophet, my prayer for you is that as you continue your faith journey and grow and develop, that you will trust that in time you too will know why God needs you to listen for and follow that Holy voice.