

1 Samuel 3:1-11

Last Saturday night was fairly typical at our house. Kelli and I set our two older kids down in front of their weekly movie while we fed the baby and caught up a bit. Ninety minutes later the older kids came downstairs, we gave them a bite to eat and herded all three off to bed.

Two hours later, as we were trying to fall asleep we noticed the steady “boom-bap” of a sub-woofer, outside our window, thumping from someone’s car stereo. We ignored it and fell asleep. It woke us up again twenty minutes later. This went on for about an hour. “Boom bap” Not loud enough to keep you from falling asleep. “Boom Bap” just loud enough to wake you up. It was now about 1:30 in the morning. I jumped out of bed, threw on my robe, pulled on my boots and walked out into the night, figuring the car must be parked around the corner.

You may have seen this on-line test you can take to determine your “real age.” This is a number determined by some combination of how much Kale you eat, how many drinks you avoid and how many hours you spend on the treadmill each week. Let me save you a little time and say that regardless of what shape you’re in or how many years short of forty you might be, your real age is “middle aged” when you find yourself out late on a Saturday night, dressed in your PJ’s and a bathrobe, hunting the street for a teenager to holler at because he’s got his radio turned up too loud.

But I couldn’t find him. There weren’t *any* cars parked on the street. I went back to bed, convinced that someone must be throwing a party next door. “Boom bap” and just when I was about to call the police Kelli said, “do you think the kids might have left their movie on?” Of course they had. Rather than some kid’s hip-hop booming out of a car down the street we’d been kept awake by our own DVD player broadcasting Cinderella on an endless loop.

Now, over the last ten years I’ve called a plumber to pull a lego from the bathtub drain. I’ve called the fire department to put out a grease fire in my oven. I’ve even called an electrician to fix a lamp that only needed its light bulb changed. And I can live with all those things. But I’m not sure I would have survived calling the police to complain about the fact that my own television was on too loud. The moral of the story is simple – when you hear a voice in the dead of night check with someone you trust before doing anything drastic.

Young Samuel already knows this. He is about fourteen years old and has lived in the Temple for years, training under the high priest Eli. Samuel doesn’t know it, but God has great things in store for him. He will lead all of Israel and stand as the one who brings the Kingdom into a new era. For now though he is a boy with tired eyes, eager to fall asleep after a long day of work.

“Samuel! Samuel!” He figures it must be his teacher and goes running to him. But Eli sends him back to bed, “Samuel! Samuel!” He gets up again, and again Eli tells him he must be mistaken. And then, “Samuel! Samuel!” The boy goes running to his teacher a third time. And now, finally, Eli understands, “It is God. God is trying to speak to you. Go and listen.”

It took these two several rounds of conversation before these they began to uncover what was really

happening. God wouldn't have been heard if Samuel and Eli hadn't talked, and talked, and talked. The boy wouldn't have known that God had great plans for him, if he hadn't first stopped and listened to someone he loved.

Here at the Hills Church we've been engaged in our Visioning Process for six months now. We've been talking, and talking. More than 100 church members have participated in these conversations. We've searched our favorite hymns, explored how best to serve our neighbors, shared stories of how the church was there for us in times of crisis. We've learned facts. Some of them have been unsettling, like the fact that on a given Sunday less than 10% of our worshiping congregation is under the age of fifty. And some have been empowering. Hundreds of members of our church claim this place as the site of their most important relationships. In all of this we've been listening very carefully.

And now, as was the case for Samuel and Eli, our conversation is about to step up a level. It is about to intensify. And it is about to become a lot more fun. Next Saturday morning at 8:30 we will gather for a delicious breakfast. The Old Testament prohibits eating pork, let alone endorsing it from the pulpit, but I'll risk a lightning strike and say that we'll serve both bacon and sausage next Saturday morning. A terrific soundtrack of Gospel music in the background. Great coffee. And a model of conversation that communities, governments, and churches around the world are using to discover their own best selves. Our morning will be expertly facilitated by Alice Mann. We will sit, four to a table, and discuss where God might be leading us and where we might like our church to go. And then we'll stand and move, and have that same conversation again with three different people. And then we'll move again and talk again, and listen again.

All of this rests upon two assumptions: There are wonderful things in store for our church. And we won't be able to discover them until we take time to stop and talk and listen with one another.

There is an urgency to all of this. The mainline Protestant church, our congregational tradition, every open-minded denomination, we are in the midst of a fifty year decline. As conservative Christianity has all but cornered the market on our faith, we have lost more than a generation of members.

Meanwhile, studies show that the majority of people who *don't go to church* stay away because they think contemporary Christianity is universally intolerant, doctrinally rigid, humorless and overly simplistic. People think their only choice is between the straight jacket of Christian fundamentalism and a Sunday morning spent alone on the couch. So the church begins to languish and thinking people's lives are not nearly as meaningful as they could be. And God intends so much more for both of us.

Picture young Samuel walking quickly through the temple's torch-lit midnight hallways, back to his room, back to his cot, back to his God. If he doesn't listen, God can't work with him. And if God can't work with him, all of Israel will languish. The boy lays on his back, his eyes wide open, and he listens. "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel says, 'speak, for your servant is listening.' And God says, 'See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it *tingle*.'

Way back in September I asked each one of you to listen and to look for clues and hints about where

and how God might be leading our church. I mentioned that my mother spent most of her career teaching at a Benedictine college. The nuns she worked with listened for God's voice regularly, as a part of their order's rule. One of them told me that she discerned God's lead by "listening to everyone. If I'm trying to make a big decision I listen to my sisters, I listen when I'm praying, I listen to my friends, I listen when I'm reading, I listen to the television. And then I start to sift through what I've heard."

So we've been listening. We've said, each one of us, in our various and very different ways, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." And God has spoken. And God is speaking. Yet my guess is that most of us aren't sure of exactly what we've heard. And this is as it should be. For on our own not one of us stands a chance of receiving God's direction for our great and multi-faceted church. Instead, we each receive a piece.

Consider the beauty of the Pratt Memorial Window in our sanctuary. It is comprised of thousands of pieces of colored glass. Individually each piece of glass glows and lets the light in. Each piece helps the light of God shine into our church. Each piece is essential. But individually none of them are spectacular and none of them are complete. It is not until they are pieced together that these individual pieces become something dazzling, a work of cohesive beauty.

All around us people are starving for deep and authentic relationships with one another. Hungry for someone to ask "how are you?" and really care about their answer. Yearning to connect with God. The world needs our EXCITING, INCLUSIVE, THOUGHTFUL, Free-thinking, God-loving CHURCH. And it is up to us to ensure that the Hills Church will help God meet this need for generations to come.

If you listen carefully you will discern a portion of God's dream for our church. If I listen carefully I will discern a piece as well. And then, next Saturday, when each and every member and friend of our church comes together in a spirit of receptivity and humility, ready to learn from God and one another, we will be able to discover how God intends to make our ears tingle, as we work together, writing the next great chapter in the story of our great church. Praise God. Amen.