

Sermon – 6/3/18
“Listening on the Journey”
1 Samuel 3, Psalm 139
2nd Sunday after Pentecost
Journey Sunday

Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
The Rev. Robert M. Alexander

Today’s scripture lesson follows the period of the judges of Israel - before there is a King. The last line of the Book of Judges declares “in those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” Israel was guided by the Word of the Lord as it came from the priest – and that priest’s name was Eli. He lived in Shiloh – Israel’s central worship place. Ironically, the word Shiloh means “tranquility and peace.” After the period of the judges that is exactly what Israel needed. But even there it was hard to find in those days.

Eli had grown complacent and had stood by and watched as his sons had corrupted the priestly role. God had told Eli that changes needed to occur, but he wasn’t listening – Eli had given up.

As the story of Samuel begins, a woman named Hannah, who had been barren her whole life, went with her husband Elkanah to make sacrifices at Shiloh. While she was there, she poured her heart out to God - asking for a child – asking for a son. She made a deal. “Lord, if you give me a child, I will offer him to You in service.”

God heard Hannah and she became pregnant and she bore a son and named him Samuel – which means “God has heard.” True to her word, she brought that little boy Samuel, as soon as he was weaned, to Shiloh to serve God under the care of Eli.

Now Eli was getting old and Samuel’s help was appreciated in the temple duties. One night, after all the chores were finished, and he had gone to bed, Samuel heard a voice.

(READ 1 SAMUEL 1: 1-20)

There is a story about Sister Mary Ann. She worked for a home health agency and was out making her rounds visiting homebound patients when she ran out of gas. There was a gas station about a block away and so she walked to the station to borrow a gas can and buy some gas. The attendant told her that the only gas can he owned had been loaned out. He invited her to wait until it was returned. Since Sister Mary Ann was on the way to see a patient, she decided not to wait and walked back to her car to try and come up with another plan.

She looked for something in her car that she could fill with gas and spotted the bedpan that she was taking to the patient. Always resourceful, Sister Mary Ann carried the bedpan to the gas station, filled it with gas, and carried the full bedpan back to her car.

As she was pouring the gas into her tank, two Presbyterian pastors watched from across the street. One of them turned to the other and said, 'If it starts, I'm becoming Catholic.!'

The person of faith sees and hears many interesting things on the journey of life. Through the lenses of faith we witness the creative artistry of God in a beautiful sunrise, experience the healing of God in an unexplained recovery from illness, witness the wisdom of God in the inspired leadership of successful peace talks, feel the presence of God in the comforting touch of a friend or family member after a hard day, and hear the call of God in the still small voice that stirs us to some action of love, mercy, or justice.

I think it has probably been that way from the beginning. For the Bible is filled with stories of people of faith who have tried to listen and respond in faith to God’s voice. Throughout scripture and our own lives we find several things to be true. There are times when we don’t hear anything from God.

There are times when what we seem to hear doesn't seem consistent with the God of love whom we worship and serve. There are times when what we think God is asking us to do is too hard and we are scared to do it. There are times when we ignore God's voice altogether and listen to the counsel and guidance of another. And there are times when we listen with the openness and attentiveness of young Samuel – "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

In this morning's text – something new was about to happen among the people of God in Israel. Eli – tired and with fading vision – had the wisdom to help Samuel – young and not yet acquainted with the Lord – discern the voice of God and to respond in faith. He would be the new mouthpiece of God for the people. Samuel – the result of God's own hearing the plea of Hannah – would now be hearing the voice of God and would have to pronounce a word of judgement to his mentor Eli. How hard is that? Samuel didn't want to do it...but Eli persisted and forced Samuel to give him the word that God had spoken to him in the night. Eli was humble enough to accept it as God's good and perfect will. His time as leader and priest was coming to an end. The justice of God had to be proclaimed.

As part of our worship this morning we have woven words from Psalm 139. The words of the Psalmist speak of God's intimate familiarity with humanity. God knows us inside and out. Knows the good and the bad, the sweet, the sour, and the salty. God has woven us together. God cares deeply for God's people and will remain with us wherever we go. There is no place on our journey of life where we can be separate from or removed from God. In the end – the Psalmist invites God to search him out and find those places in him that are not of God and that do not lead him on the path of life – "the everlasting way." If Eli had prayed such a prayer would he have found himself in the predicament he was in?

If any of us, on our own journeys could open ourselves with such honesty and humility before God we might find ourselves able to listen and to respond in faith. Even when the task given to us is difficult – even when it means we might have to utter a word of judgement that is hard for someone else to hear. Now – I want to be careful here – because I know that judgement is reserved for God and that there is enough finger pointing and judging going on in our world and enough words blamed on God...but I also think that we have to speak truth in our world and call people to task for the things that they are doing which are wrecking lives.

Eli had stood by and watched as his sons had abused the priestly role and had shown contempt for God and their position of power. As this was brought to Samuel's attention in his vision with God, he was called upon to speak out and to proclaim the truth that he had heard. This is what listening on the journey brings us to. It brings us to a realization of what the ways of life are in the world and how we are called to bring a course correction with the gifts we have been given and by the power given to us by the Spirit of God.

In this Pentecost season we celebrate the movement of the Holy Spirit in the world and open ourselves to that same Spirit who is bringing about transformation and new life. We too can be mouthpieces of God as we speak out against the injustices of our day and as we engage in God's work in the world. We follow the Risen Christ to those places where we can do justice and love kindness as we offer ourselves in service to the God of All Life.

And just as Samuel needed Eli to hear the voice of God, so we need each other to discern what God is calling us to do and be. In worship, in Bible study, in small groups, in women's circles, in Sunday school classes and youth group, in children's weekday classes, and committee meetings – yes even committee meetings – we help each other listen and respond in faith – "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

Our Nicaragua mission team has been trying to discern God's will for us over the last 6 weeks. Toward the end of April protests in Nicaragua were met with violence and many were killed and injured. Talks have stalled, protests have continued, and violence continues to erupt in very unexpected and unpredictable ways. Listening to the wisdom of our partners, to people here in the states who care deeply for the people of Nicaragua, and, I think, guided by the Holy Spirit, we have decided to postpone our trip. We are deeply saddened and want to stand in solidarity with the people of Nicaragua and with our partners there to find a way forward for peace and justice. We want to speak out for an end to violence and bloodshed. We want to speak out for the poor and the marginalized. We want to speak out against the corruption and the abuse of power. For now, we will have to do that from here. But we will go ahead with our commissioning today because we are still on this journey with our partners in Nicaragua – listening and discerning how best to support them - and we will continue to walk with them and hopefully, go to be with them in person as soon as it is safe enough to do so. I invite your interest, your prayers, and your support as well.

One of the publications of the Presbyterian Mission Agency is "Mission Crossroads." We subscribe to this as a church and keep several copies outside the office for people to pick up and read. I invite you to stop by and get a copy so you can learn about how people in our own denomination are listening to God on the Journey of Life. The spring edition of Mission Crossroads was dedicated to the Young Adult Volunteer program. The YAV program is celebrating its 25th year. More than 1700 young people ages 19-30 have participated in ministries all over the world during that time. Many of our own church members like Allison Wehrung, Emily Wilkes, Russ Kerr, Elizabeth Welliver, and most recently Julia Burkley have discerned God's call to serve through the YAV program.

One story highlighted in the publication is about Samantha Williams who was a YAV in Nashville, TN in 2004. Following her service she continued to hear God calling her to work for food justice and for an end to homelessness. Listening on the Journey has led her to establish a new business making and selling "organic pancake-mix." She employs women who are striving to overcome homelessness and provides a healthy, sustainable, alternative product for consumers. Samantha did not discern this on her own but through thoughtful conversations with others.

I have recently had a similar sense of calling as I have listened to what God is doing in my life and in the world. It doesn't have anything to do with pancake mix though – it has to do with running and with modern day slavery. I will be sharing more with the congregation later this month before we head out on my sabbatical on July 1st. In brief – I will share that God has placed it on my heart to do something to raise awareness about the issue of Human Trafficking. Our family is working together with other friends to organize a 50-mile run at the end of September called *50 for Freedom*. We are partnering with Charlotte based Lily Pad Haven to raise \$50,000 to help support their efforts to house and care for survivors of human trafficking. Modern-Day slavery is estimated to impact nearly 27 million people around the world. North Carolina is ranked 8th in the nation as a location where trafficking occurs and the Charlotte region is ranked 1st in the state. That is not a statistic of which we should be proud. But together we can make a difference for women and men who have been victimized and abused. I hope you will join the effort.

Just as Eli helped Samuel listen for God's voice so we too are invited to help one another discern God's voice and call amidst all the many competing voices in the world and in life. What an awesome and holy task it is to help someone discern what God might be calling them to do. We have already identified many from our congregation today who have helped our children and youth in their own faith journey throughout the year. Later in the service we will commission members who are going out this summer to serve in various capacities and we'll celebrate the journey of our High School graduates who are bound for lives of service to God of their own. Just as Samuel responded in faith even when it was difficult for him to speak the word of truth that he was given – so may these graduates find themselves encountering a word from God that calls them to action on behalf of others in the world. Only God knows where they

will be led as they open themselves up to God in honesty and humility to discern “the everlasting way” they are invited to walk. It may not be easy, but we have the comforting words of the Psalmist to ground us in the promise that God knows us, loves us, and is always with us.

The Psalm writer concludes with an expressed desire to walk in God’s way. I invite you to make these words your prayer as together we listen for God’s word and guidance on the journey of life. “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know, my anxious thought. See if there be any hurtful way in me. (x2) Lead me in the everlasting way. (x2) Search me, O God, and know my heart.”

I close with the words of a prayer written by Christian mystic Thomas Merton. Let us pray. “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.” (Thomas Merton, Thoughts in Solitude)