

How do you know when God is speaking to you?

How do you comprehend what God is trying to say?

This is a question that we all wrestle with in one form or another.

How do you know when God is trying to talk to you?

How does he get your attention? How do you know that it is him?

Is it an audible voice? Should we expect to see an angel visit us in our daily routine like one did to Mary and deliver her a message from God? Should a heavenly figure come to us in our dreams like one did to Joseph and tell him how he should protect his young son? Should we see a sign in the heavens, like the magi, and just know what God is calling us to do? Does a voice call out to us in the night like it did to the boy, Samuel?

Some of you may explain this away by saying, “Well that is how God spoke to people back then, but God does not do that in our day and time.”

God worked differently back then in the Old Testament.

Others of you may explain your not hearing God’s voice by assuming that you are just not holy enough for that to happen.

God obviously speaks more clearly to those of us who wear clerical collars or have a better connection with the big guy upstairs.

Some may have concluded that God does not want to communicate with us at all. God has more important things to attend to than me and my concerns and worries. Why would God bother?

This question of knowing how and if God is speaking to us is big one for us as Christians. How are we to grow in our relationship with God if we are worried that the conversation is always one-sided?

And if God is actually speaking to us, how do we make sure that we don’t miss what he is saying? Hopefully our lessons for today, particularly the story of Samuel, can give us a clearer sense of how God does speak to you and me.

As the story begins, Samuel is this young boy who lived and worked at the temple of the Lord under the direction of the priest, Eli.

He was brought to the temple as an infant and dedicated to the Lord

by his mother, Hannah. She had been barren until God heard her prayers and opened her womb. So the temple was home to Samuel.

So late one night before the dawning of a new day, Samuel is awakened by a voice calling his name. Samuel did not yet know the Lord.

The word of the Lord had not been revealed to him yet.

He gets up and goes to his mentor, Eli, assuming that he had called him.

Eli is old. His eyesight is poor. He may have been in need of Samuel's help.

Here I am, for you called me. Eli wakes up to the sound of Samuel's voice and tells him to go back to bed. This happens not once, not twice, but three times. No one is getting a good night's sleep.

However, after being awakened the third time by the boy,

Eli starts to figure out exactly who is calling the Samuel.

And so he gives Samuel the words he should say if the voice should call out to him again. A fourth time the voice calls out to him and this time Samuel responds,

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Thus Samuel knows the Lord, listens to him, and begins to serve him as his prophet.

Now what does this tell us about our hearing and responding to God's call?

First, it is comforting to see that Samuel did not have a clue about what was going on? He heard a voice in the night and he logically assumed that it was Eli calling him. He interpreted what he heard in a way that made sense to him. He needed help from his mentor, Eli, to learn exactly who was calling him. Secondly, Eli, who should be the expert in this story, does not pick up on things immediately himself. He knows that he did not call Samuel and awaken him; but it takes him being woken up three times before he figures out what is going on.

We assume that when we hear of God speaking in the Old Testament that it was this obvious, booming voice from heaven. Samuel's experience may tell us that God speaking to him was not as clear as it may have originally seemed to be. It also tells us that we cannot expect to hear God and follow him on our own.

We need the community of the church. We need an Eli.

We need each other to help listen and discern what God is saying to us.

This story also tells us about the God who calls upon Samuel.

For one thing, if there is nothing else you learn from this story it is that God is persistent. He calls and calls and calls and calls upon Samuel.

He keeps calling until Samuel knows how to respond. You get the sense that God was going to patiently call upon Samuel again and again, even if it took all night, to get his attention and say to him what needed to be said. Instead of our Lord being absent or too busy on other important matters, I think the exact opposite is true.

I believe that God is constantly trying to communicate with us.

If that is true, the question is why do we fail to hear God when he speaks to us? Some would say that the problem is not hearing God's voice as much as it is picking out God's voice from all the other voices that we hear. There are so many different voices that call for our attention. Constantly we are bombarded by messages that divert our attention from God. We are told by our culture to focus on success or sex or beauty or self-aggrandizement every direction we turn. The struggle is to listen to God and desire what God wants for us more than what the world around us says is important.

The other issue we have in hearing when God speaks to us is

Samuel's own difficulty. We mistake the voice of God for something else.

We hear what God is saying but we discount it as just a random thought or we lack the confidence to act on it. We doubt that what we hear is truly a call to action from God. The calling can be subtle.

It may be that voice in the back of our head or a comment made by a friend or something that we notice for a fleeting moment and wonder if we should respond. All these encounters can be God encouraging us and directing us to carry out his will.

What if God calling out to Samuel was only a whisper?

Would that have been any less reason for Samuel to respond?

Could God be calling and nudging us to do his will

in the world in just as subtle but persistent ways?

Another reason why we may fail to hear God's voice is that, plain and simple, we do not want to listen to him. We may hear clearly what our Lord is calling us to do and decide that it is too difficult or too costly for us to carry out. In that case, we like Samuel awaken in the night, hear the voice calling, but then choose to roll over and go back to sleep. We choose our will over what God wills.

How we should respond is given to us in the example of Samuel. We get help from the Eli(s) in our life in discerning what God is saying to us. The spirit of God that seeks to speak to us also dwells in our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. God will speak through them and Scripture and in any way he sees fit to reaffirm what he is calling us to do. In the church, we rely on each other; we pray for each other as we discern how God is calling us to live out our faith from day to day.

Secondly, we respond in the words of Samuel, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." When we believe that God is speaking to us we humbly open ourselves to listen and to obey. We open ourselves to the God, who as Psalm 139 tells us, knows when we sit & when we rise; who knows us better than we know ourselves. We do so as those who love God and trust him to lead us. We make ourselves available to the God who longs to speak to us. We acknowledge him as our Lord and us as those who serve him. We ask God to speak to us, to direct us, to show us what he wants us to do to spread his love and continue his work in the world. When we do so we can trust that God will guide us according to his will.

The good news for us is that if we fail to hear God speak to us the first time, like he did with Samuel, God will continue to call us again & again & again. Our Lord is persistent. Our Lord knows that we are bombarded by a myriad of voices. Our Lord knows that we are hard of hearing. Our Lord knows that we need help from other believers to hear and obey. Like Samuel we go from being people who dwell in God's temple to discovering that we ourselves are temples of God.

God gives us his Spirit to dwell within us, to speak to us,  
and to guide us in God's ways.

As we live in this community of faith together, we help each other hear  
and grow more sensitive to the ways that our Lord calls us.

We actively seek to hear God's voice as we go about our daily lives.

We pay attention to the nudges and the promptings of the Spirit  
within us. And step by step, over time, we learn to trust  
that still, small voice that leads us to walk in the ways of God.

May God continue to call us again and again  
and then through his Spirit give us the faith  
to listen and follow him.