



## FINDING GOD: BY LISTENING

July 2, 2017, Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

First Samuel 3:1-11, First Kings 19:9b-15a

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As I turn fifty this summer, my body occasionally reminds me that I am no longer twenty-five. I have much less hair to comb. I need my reading glasses more often. And I find myself asking people to repeat what they are saying to me particularly when I am in a crowded, noisy room.

I am grateful that none of these issues is life threatening. But not hearing people very well does raise concern. What concerns me is not so much the biological functioning of my ears but my attitude toward listening. I worry that I could fall prey to the tendency of the middle-aged to not believe they need to listen all that carefully anymore. After all, we middle-aged folks have experienced a fair bit in this world and we have learned a fair bit as well. I mean, c'mon, is there really anything left for me to learn??? I fear growing world-weary and lacking the curiosity needed to hear new things. I fear accruing so many opinions over time that when someone else is talking all I am doing is waiting for my turn to speak.

This sermon is the second in a series of the *Five Ways We Find God (Or God Finds Us)*. Today we will be considering how listening plays a role in finding God in our lives. In our two texts this morning we heard tales of listening. In the first text, young Samuel was awakened by the calling of his name.

He hears the voice beckoning to him and responds, "Here I am," rushing to the elderly Eli, for whom he cares. After Eli tells him he did not call him, Samuel lies down once more. Again Samuel hears his name called out, and again he rushes to



Eli's side only to be told again he was not called by him. When it happens a third time, Eli understands what is happening and instructs the boy on what to do. This time Samuel responds to the calling of his name by saying, "Speak, for your servant is listening." And the Lord says to him, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle."

Of course most of us are not prophets who will be awakened by God calling our name in the night. But I am struck by an important dynamic of the listening required by Samuel to understand what he is being told. First he has to be receptive to hearing that voice calling his name and recognize that he is indeed being called for something. And then he needs to listen to Eli's advice to him that it is God who is doing the calling and how he should respond.

Most of us do not receive an unambiguous word from the Lord in our ears. But something draws us to places like this church. And when we are here, others recognize the ways in which God may be calling us. We are invited to volunteer over at Jan Hus, or we are asked to serve as an elder or a deacon, or someone encourages us to join a Bible Study. When we seek to listen for how God may be calling us forward it is rarely by some single disembodied voice. Most of the time it is a confluence of experiences and people to which we will need to listen in order to hear the divine leading us.

In our text from First Kings this morning, we get a dramatic, even pyrotechnic, epiphany between the prophet Elijah and God. We get "a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces." We get an earthquake. We get a fire. And God was in none of them. And then came what the NRSV translation of the Bible calls, "a sound of sheer silence" but no translation can quite do the Hebrew justice. A Jewish commentary on this text notes that the word describing the silence has a tangible, tactile sense to it "that is 'fine' like powder or dust."<sup>1</sup> It is as if the silence itself is embodied. Another scholar notes that this same word is used in Psalm 107 to describe the calm that follows a storm. Perhaps another way to describe it is a pregnant pause.



Then Elijah is able to hear God's word to him. He could not hear God's Word in the midst of the wind or the earthquake or the fire. It was only in the calm after the storm that he could hear God's Word. Most of us do not encounter rock-breaking winds, earthquakes or fires very often. But we do have our own share of small-scale pyrotechnics in our lives. We have overscheduled days and family conflicts, pressure at work, and non-stop social media updates on our phones about everything from celebrity mishaps to global crises. In response to all of these varied stimuli, we talk and talk and talk, and type and type and type. We offer words upon words upon words. We explain. We justify. We defend. We question. We comment. We complain. With all of that blaring in the background and our endless responses to it, it is pretty hard for God to get a word in edgewise.

Elijah had to find a place beyond the storms, beyond his own words, beyond a multitude of distractions for him to be able hear God's Word.

If we listen to what occurs in the first creation story in the book of Genesis an interesting discovery awaits us. On the first day God speaks, saying, "Let there be light" and there is light. On the next day, God speaks, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." And it is so. And the next day God speaks and creates yet again. And each day is the same with God speaking and creating. But then something different happens on the seventh day. The work of creation is completed by God resting. The divine does not utter a single word. God is in silence. And in silence God hallows that seventh day, acknowledging its holiness. In the midst of all of those remarkable good words and good works in the creation myth, it is only in the silence, after the storm of speaking and creating, that holiness is found.

If we wish to hear God's Word for us, we may need to find a time and a place beyond the consistent hustle and bustle of our lives. We may need to create for ourselves opportunities to experience silence; to put the demands of the day at a momentary arms-length; to stop filling the world with our own words for a moment that we might hear words from a deeper place. For most of us this is a discipline in which we could use some practice. There are a variety of ways to find



this silence. It does not need to be achieved locked in a monastery somewhere. The silence does not need to be actual complete silence; it is silence in terms of not being preoccupied with incessantly responding to the loudest and the latest. It is a quiet within oneself that allows for us to hear different sorts of things.

Quiet within oneself can be found at the end of the workday as we ignore our phones and sit still on the uptown bus or in a cab. Quiet within oneself can be found first thing in the morning, for a few minutes before allowing the rush to begin. Quiet within oneself can be found in the middle of the day, closing our office door for lunch and eating without distraction. Quiet within oneself can be found as we approach this table this morning to be fed. It is a matter of allowing time for these silences in one form or another. And in the midst of these silences we will find ourselves able to listen for things in our lives that have previously gone unnoticed, including and especially how God may be speaking to us.

Listening has become a lost art form these days. We are pretty adept at filling the world with our words, but we are not that good at hearing the words coming from others. With July 4<sup>th</sup> and the celebration of this remarkable nation approaching, I think this is an important word for our country as well. In public affairs we have lost the ability to listen to each other, to dialogue, to gain truth from sources not our own. And this inability lessens who we are together.

Let us learn from Samuel and Elijah of what can be gained by listening. The blessing of a deep and abiding relationship with the divine awaits us if we are willing to listen. We need to allow for times in our days beyond the drama and chaos, where silence can be found and our ears can grow accustomed to more subtle callings. We need to pay careful attention to what those around us say to us. They may very well be ways, conduits, by which God's Spirit is speaking to us. And we need to listen closely to our own lives.

The author Frederick Buechner describes a time in his life when his home in the New England countryside was undergoing repairs:



“The swallows, the rooster, the workmen, my stomach, all with elusive rhythms, their harmonies and disharmonies and counterpoint, became, as I listened, the sound of my own life speaking to me. Never had I heard just such a coming together of sounds before, and it is unlikely that I will ever hear them in just the same combination again. Their music was unique and unrepeatable and beyond describing in its freshness. I have no clear idea what the sounds meant or what my life was telling me.

What does the song of the swallow mean? What is the muffled sound of a hammer trying to tell? And yet as I listened to those sounds, and listened with something more than just my hearing, I was moved by their inexpressible eloquence and suggestiveness, by the sense I had that they were a music rising up out of the mystery of not just my life, but of life itself. In much the same way, that is what I mean by saying that God speaks into or out of the thick of our days.”

And then Buechner sums it all up later with this, “We must learn to listen to the cock-crows and hammering and tick-tock of our lives for the holy and elusive word that is spoken to us out of their depths.”<sup>2</sup>

*Thanks be to God. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Walsh, Jerome T, *Berit Olam: First Kings*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1996, p. 276.

<sup>2</sup> Buechner, Frederick, *The Sacred Journey*, Harper, New York, 1982, p. 41.