

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Here I Am

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The sermon series we begin today explores some of the most memorable characters in our Old Testament – Samuel, David, the giant Philistine Goliath, and those who follow.

Our lectionary readings concern people, politics, and theology.

These stories from First and Second Samuel plumb the complexities of the human person. In no uncertain terms, God complains of the fault in our political longings. We see spin doctors at work in this holy text. And throughout all these adventures we feel God with us.

Even though they were written ten centuries before the time of Christ, these many eons later they captivate, entice, and challenge us as much as the characters who populate our lives today.¹

Collectively they teach us to listen for God's desires.

Our first story opens at a time when faith had fallen out of vogue.

Faith no longer seemed, shall we say, "relevant," as the culture slipped further and further from sensing God's presence or power.

Samuel is a young lad given to apprentice with Eli, the religious leader.

¹ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation and Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1999), xxi.

Help us listen

*to your gentle voice speaking in the silence
in the close call of the birds, the dogs barking,
children squealing with delight.*

*And when it is wild with rain and wind,
and we have sought shelter from the storm outside
and inside our soul,
may your voice sooth our laments and rouse sense of
wonder about you. Speak to us, your servants are listening.*

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

⁴Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and Samuel said, "Here I am!" ⁵and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down.

⁶The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again."

⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸ The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy.

⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’”

So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

The whole universe is humming. Every star, every planet, every continent, every building, every person is vibrating along to the slow cosmic beat.

Over the course of the last fifteen years, a team of astrophysicists from the North American Nanohertz Observatory for Gravitational Waves have pored over their machines and mathematical theories to bring us proof that something miraculous—something wonderful—is happening right under our noses.

They recently detected a cosmic background of ripples in space and time stretching back to the birth of the universe. Their discovery

does not imply that the nature of reality has changed or that we will suddenly detect vibrations in our morning coffee. Their deep listening leads us to know that each of us contains the signature of everything that has ever been.

Every proton and neutron in every atom from the top of your head to the tip of your toes is shifting, shuttling, and vibrating in a collective purr. You move as a part of the entire history of the universe. And if you put your hand down on a chair or table or anything else nearby, that object, too, is dancing that slow waltz.

Adam Frank, professor of astrophysics, writes about their discoveries with the excitement of a child peering through a telescope, seeing beyond the Milky Way for the first time. Perhaps the giddiness he effuses comes from a deep place within, a childlike sense of wonder also held by those other scientists: everything is amazing.²

Children possess a sense of curiosity and innocence. Not limited by any previous understanding of the limits of the known world or corrupted by the prejudices that separate people, children will notice and speak of what we road-weary adults ignore.

² Adam Frank, "Scientists Found Ripples in Space and Time. And You Have to Buy Groceries." *The Atlantic*, June 29, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2023/06/universe-gravitational-waves-nanograv-discovery/674570/?utm_campaign=the-atlantic&utm_content=edit-promo&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook

In the beginning of all time God's voice calls creation into being and it echoes, still.

Whether called God's voice or gravitational waves nudging scientists' imaginations, the cosmos still hums from that first big bang. The order God establishes for celestial bodies influences the movement of the water of the earth, the turn of seasons, growth of plants, down to all minute and finite beings.

God creates uniqueness and individuality as well as the harmony and order. God's voice blesses the first humans and guides them.

Those humans felt God's presence as clearly as you and I discern each other, that is until they decide to trust their own ideas and follow their own desires.

Ever since leaving the Garden of Eden, we've sought to hear God with the same intimacy. And yet, when we are honest, we fear that following God's voice will limit our lifestyles.

It's all very simple and somehow we make it all so difficult. God's call reverberates throughout creation but with the message we'd rather not accept, so we ignore it.

Maybe that explains why a time long ago, when God becomes so frustrated with the obtuse adults in charge, those who think they

know the way of the world, those who think they are in charge, that God speaks to a young boy.

The story tells us plainly that despite Eli's position as the spiritual leader, God's word "was rare." As background to this story, if Eli truly respected God's word he'd discipline his own sons for their corrupt behavior. By custom, Eli's sons should inherit his position of both privilege and responsibility.

But Eli "could not see" God's presence because he placed loyalties with them. He sought to maintain the family even though it drew him and the community further and further from God.

On one level this story tells of a common man, perhaps because we know someone who is like him or have experienced that same conflict within ourselves.

I feel the day-to-day the tension when I recount in my prayers the ways I ignore what I believe God desires. Share. Give. Forgive. And I don't.

On another level, Eli represents the broader human culture and the way a community gets caught in a system of rights and opportunities that serves those controlling or benefiting from the institutions and not the broader population.

Think of the phrases “corporate grind,” or “hustle culture,” or the corruption that infests entitlements. We know these persist and yet we feel paralyzed to amend our collective ways.

This story wreaks of our human faults.

So God calls to the innocent.

Even though Samuel serves Eli, the text tells us that he had not learned about God – that’s how little Eli serves God.

When God calls, Samuel runs in obedience to Eli and repeats, “here I am.”

Imagine Eli’s horror to realize that this young man receives the promise lost to his own sons for their refusal to listen to him and for his ignoring God.

If Samuel races to say, “here I am,” what is its opposite?

“I don’t care.” “I don’t want you.” “You do not matter in my life.”

Samuel’s curiosity and his innocence brings him to say over and over, “here I am.”

The only hope for Eli and the community requires him to encourage Samuel to listen and to receive God’s message.

God's word is never for one person only. God may speak with clarity and intimacy to one person and on behalf of all humanity.

How do we know when God calls?

Do you know what God's voice sounds like?

Have you ever felt God speak to you?

I'll pause and let you remember.

It's not just the young who can hear God.

To hear God requires letting go of the fear we harbor of judgement or change or to accept a call to do something beyond what we imagine possible. To hear God begins with a simple, "here I am."

If, as scholars claim, this story functions at the individual level and critiques the overall society, how does God's speak in our community, our city, our world?

Those astrophysicists followed their curiosity to listen in deep space for echoes. Their discovery upset accepted scientific theories and will be subject to later reversals. If they can continually push beyond the known limits of scientific understanding, what does it take for us to imagine what God wants in our lives and say, "here we are"?

The late Howard Thurman – distinguished scholar and theologian, describes walking home one night from seminary. Although he had taken this route many times, he had never noticed the sound of water, not even a drip. The next day Thurman mentioned this to one of his professors, who told him that a canal ran underneath the street. Because the noises of streetcars, automobiles, and passersby were absent late at night, Howard could discern the sound of water.

Thurman equates these sounds to the inner chatter within our minds that prevents us from being aware of God’s presence. What attracts and holds our attention determines how and when we will experience God. He urges us to quiet the surface noise in our minds.

He writes when...

we learn to listen, to swing wide the very doors of our being, to clean out the corners and the crevices of our life—so that when God’s Presence invades, we are free to enjoy God coming to God’s own self in us.”³

Decades later at a baccalaureate service Thurman offered this wisdom to graduates:

³ Howard Thurman, prologue to *Temptations of Jesus* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1978), 14.

Lerita Coleman Brown, *What Makes You Come Alive: A Spiritual Walk with Howard Thurman* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2023), 121–123.

“If you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls”⁴

The simple statement, “here I am,” asks us to risk disrupting our tidy lives and the lives of others. And the simple, “here I am,” invites us to deep communion with God’s very presence that inhabits our being.

⁴ Howard Thurman quoted by Nanette Sawyer, “June 2 Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time,” *The Christian Century*, June 2024, p 24.



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