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**“Are We Listening?”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
June 3, 2018
2 Corinthians 4:5-12, Mark 2:23 - 3:6, 1 Samuel 3:1-10**

It’s happened to most of us at some time or another. A voice, a noise, or some inexplicable sound comes to us as we walk down the street, eat dinner, or sit in a meeting. We turn to the person next to us, cautiously, and say, “Did you hear that?” We glance around us for some logical explanation for that sound. What was it? Where did it come from? Was my mind playing tricks on me? We know that people who hear voices aren’t always considered to be of sound mind and so we carefully assign a logical explanation to the sound and pay no further attention to it.

Today’s passage, however, may cause us to wonder if there aren’t some voices we should be listening to? Does God speak to us in this day and age? If so, what does God’s voice sound like? When and how does it come to us? What does it mean?

If we look to the Bible, we realize that God’s people heard voices all the time. Almost every chapter in the Bible has God speaking either through a bush, or the wind, or a prophet, or a psalmist, or an angel. My guess is that a good number of the Israelites, at one time or another, heard unexplainable noises, but

only the faithful listened closely to discern what God was saying to them and how God was directing their lives.

Samuel and Eli were among these faithful. Eli was older and had experienced God enough to know when God was speaking. Samuel, the apprentice, the young boy, was still learning to be faithful, so when the sound came to him that dark night as he lay in his bed he did not recognize it as God's voice. He tried to explain it away and the only reasonable explanation was the one that Eli was calling him. He came to Eli, saying, "You called. Here I am." But Eli told him that he had not called him and sent the young, confused Samuel back to bed. Of course, it happened again. "Samuel." Then the pitter, patter of young feet as they ran obediently into Eli's room, "You called. Here I am." Then the confused boy trudged back again to his bed, only to have the same thing happen a third time.

Finally, Eli got wise. Samuel was not making these voices up. He was not hearing random noises. There could be no other truly faithful explanation. God was speaking to Samuel. "Go back to your bed," Eli instructed the befuddled boy. "If he calls you again, say, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel returned to his room to await the voice of the Lord.

Now. If the story ended here, we would have a lovely, inspiring tale about how God calls us in the night, a story about an old man's wisdom and a young boy's innocent, unquestioning faith. But the story doesn't end here. As we read on past verse 10, we discover just why God is speaking to Samuel. God says to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle."

And I don't think God meant that in a pleasant ticklish sort-of way.

Samuel listened quietly as God revealed what was going to happen. God told Samuel that the punishment he had promised upon the house of Eli would take place. Though Eli had been faithful, his sons had been unfaithful and had turned against God in many and blatant ways. Eli bore some of the blame for their behavior as their father and as one who chose not to restrain them when they spoke against God. Eli had been weak in dealing with his sons and now he and his family line would pay the price for that.

And that was it. God spoke no words about what this meant to Israel, or about what Samuel's role was to be in the midst of this all. All Samuel knew, as he lay his head back on his pillow, was that his mentor, his advisor, his priest, his friend, was going to be punished forever.

That night Samuel matured more quickly than he could have ever dreamed. Suddenly things had taken a radical turn. The day before, Eli had been the priest, the one to whom and through whom God spoke.

But now . . . now Samuel was the one who was receiving the Word of the Lord and Eli was turning to Samuel to learn what God would say. From that night on, Samuel became known as a prophet to the people Israel.

Now if you are like me, you may still be feeling sorry for Eli, who (no doubt) should have done better with his sons, but who now was really getting a raw deal. But if we get stuck feeling sorry for Eli, we lose the significance of this passage. This passage describes a turning point, a point that marks a significant shift in the life of God's people Israel. The priests of Israel (Eli's sons) had become corrupt and were no more interested in God than the worst pagans of the day. Because of that, the people had become disinterested and disillusioned. The ones who remained faithful cried out to the Lord to be relieved from the "spiritual

desolation, religious corruption, political danger, and social upheaval” that had become a part of daily, expected life. God did not let their cries go unanswered. God gave them Samuel to be a prophet who spoke of radical transformation and new beginnings. God gave them Samuel because it was time for things to change.

Don't those words sound familiar?

“It's time for things to change.”

Certainty you and I have heard these words, and even used them, especially after the murder of innocent high school students in Parkland and Santa Fe, and too many other schools. “It's time for things to change” we hear people say when teachers by the thousands march for the sake of children and education, when the gap between the rich and the poor gets wider and wider, when hardworking, good people are deported back to danger and possible death, when every street corner has a homeless person begging for help, when evictions keep people without stable housing, when hate speech is used by the same people who condemn hate speech, when cities and people across the United States continue to struggle against racism and gun-violence, wrongful injustices and undeserved death all over the place.

Daily we hear the news and then pause to say, “It's time for things to change.” Will we also ask “What will God say to us today?”

I am reminded of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. and the way he listened closely for the voice of God during a time when things also needed to change and the country required radical transformation. Dr. King recognized that all was not well in the world, but that, through God's grace and in light of God's

love, all could be transformed. Dr. King had a significant prayer life and sought God's guidance constantly through his study and prayers. He heard God's voice not because it came any clearer to him than it comes to any of us, but because he was listening, and because he was expecting to hear God speak to him.

Too often we assume that God is no longer speaking to us in a voice we can understand and interpret. We believe that God spoke to the saints and prophets but will not speak to us. We believe we are not important enough for God to address. We are ashamed to admit that we don't know how to listen – or what we might be listening for.

Some will also ask, "Didn't the religious extremists who committed violent, murderous acts of hatred also believe God was speaking to them?"

In many cases, they did.

So how do we discern what is God's voice and what is our own voice?

Fortunately, the bible is a useful tool for us in this – especially as we understand how Jesus is revealed to us in the gospels. How does Jesus say we are to live? The greatest and first commandment is this: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind." The second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

We understand God's voice through the filter of Jesus' life and words. Would this God speak to us in ways that instruct us to evil, vengeance, murder or violence? No. Would this God ask us to harm ourselves or others? Never. As Christians we will always have the law of love as our guide. Always. We will always have the law of love as our filter for understanding how God is speaking to us and

what God is calling us to do and be. If we think God's voice is saying something to us that does not fit into the law of love, then we are hearing other voices. We are not hearing God.

If you dare, go find your quiet place. Open your ears. Prepare for them to tingle with the voice of the Lord. Listen. . . . Listen. . . . And when God calls your name, stay where you are, turn to the sound of God's voice and say, "Here I am, Lord. Your servant is listening." Let the radical transformation begin.

In the name of our Triune God. Amen.

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