

Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-10, 11-29
2 Corinthians 4:5-12 (Series B. 2nd Sunday after Pentecost) Ps.139:1-6, 13-18
Gospel Mark 2:23 - 3:6

Let us pray.

What?"

It's what we often say in English, at least in parts of Canada and English speaking countries, when we hear or see or feel something that shocks us, or feels unbelievable, or out of place. "What?" we say. Then we may say or think, "Did I hear that right?" Or "Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?" Or "This doesn't feel right." "What?"

It's *what* the pastor who gets that call from the Synod thinks when he or she hears the voice at the other end of the call. It's *what* loyal employees think when word comes down that their entire division is shutting down and their jobs are gone. It's *what* families of the military, or police, or firefighters think when people dressed in uniform appear at their door with news to share.

It's *what* we think when something doesn't feel right—there's pain, or memory loss, or a sudden lack of coordination—so we go to the doctor for tests. And it may be what we think when the test results are in and the diagnosis comes.

What?" Or, perhaps less dramatically, it's what we say when we're asleep, and someone awakens us unexpectedly. "What?" The first lesson this morning does not say Eli said "What?" when Samuel woke him up twice one night, claiming Eli had called him and he was there to do Eli's request.

But I don't think it's a stretch to imagine that's what he may have been thinking. "What? No, no, I didn't call you. Go back to bed my son." *And the second time:* "What? Again? No, I told you, I didn't call you. Go back to bed my son!"

But the third: “Oh. I see. Go back to bed. And if he calls you again, say, “*Speak, O Lord our God, your servant is listening.*” Samuel spoke as Eli instructed. And it was news from the Lord that would likely make Samuel say, “What?” Eli’s sons had disdained the priesthood, treating it as their privilege to advantage themselves rather than fulfill God’s calling to serve among the people.

Eli had failed to rein them in, so his household was done for, and no amount of sacrifices now could repair or atone for the damage that had been done. We don’t know what Samuel said, just that he then lay there in his bed all night long, pondering it, wondering what to do about it. What?

Often, when this story is told, we focus on the failings of Eli and the faithfulness of Samuel. The story, as written, certainly supports that kind of focus. But today, I’d like us to focus on the faithfulness and wisdom of the failed priest. It is Eli, in this story, who ultimately shows us how to handle ourselves in the face of things that make us say, “*What?*”

In verse 5 that Samuel heard the voice of the Lord and assumed it was Eli’s voice. Let that sink in. Though we learn in verse 7 that Samuel had never before heard the word of the Lord come to him, the moment he did, he was sure the voice was of the priest who had taken him in and raised him, the priest whom he accompanied and served in his ministrations to the Lord through sacrifice, prayer, and other forms of ritual.

What does this say about how those we raise will hear God’s voice? And Eli was a failed priest, failed in that he had not successfully led his sons to take up his work after him. But still, when the voice of the Lord came to Samuel, Samuel heard Eli. Eli’s sons wouldn’t listen to their father, much less God. Samuel did. Indeed, Samuel heard God’s voice as Eli’s voice.

We may think Eli was a bit slow about recognizing the voice Samuel was hearing as being the voice of the Lord. But let us not miss that he did notice this. And he did more than notice. He taught Samuel how to respond.

And the next morning, it was Eli who initiated the follow up conversation about what happened. It was Eli who insisted Samuel hold back nothing of what the Lord had told him.

And though what Samuel told him, no doubt with some nervousness, was certainly enough to make anyone say, “What?,” Eli’s response showed the way forward. *“It is the Lord. Let him do what pleases him”*.

We may find ourselves facing all sorts of transitions in our lives just now— in our families, in our work, in our schooling, in our congregation, in our denomination, in our community, in our nation, and in our world. I can say there hasn’t been a day go by recently when I haven’t heard some news that made us say, *“What?”*

But Eli shows us the way to deal with each *“What?”* It’s to keep listening. It’s to let the *“What?”* keep coming until we understand where it’s coming from, even if we don’t yet know what it all means.

It’s to realize the Lord may be speaking to us or to someone else in the midst of our *“What?”* And if it’s not to us, directly, it’s to encourage those to whom the Lord is speaking to share what they heard, and not be afraid to share it. In the What we learn the act of listening to the Holy Spirit as God’s children, trusting, *“It is the Lord.”*

Somewhere, in every *“What?”*, or in the places where each *“What?”* leads, we are hearing from God. The *“What?”* indicates our initial shock, or fear, or disbelief, or awe in the face of something we sense is changing, transitioning.

The *“What?”* is a gift that catches our attention and causes us, if we pay attention, to seek to learn more, to get greater clarity, even if we fear we won’t like what greater clarity will bring.

We live in the information age with tremendous technological advancements in the field of communications. Almost everyone in the world has access to television, cell phones, computers and the internet. We have the choice to decide what radio frequency we listen to or what television channel we watch.

The most widely used media today to share information is social media but what we often see and hear is not the truth. All the advances in information technology is nothing compared to God’ way of communication.

When God speaks, His message is always the truth. It is directed to the right person, the right way and at precisely the right time but He leaves us the choice to decide whether or not to listen to His voice.

- a) *The voice of God*
- b) *The voice of the world*
- c) *The voice of the devil*
- d) *The voice of self*

The “What?” pursued as Eli pursued it, may be the Spirit’s groan from within us, too deep for words, that leads us to cry out “Abba! Father!” And then, then, we can choose, like Eli, to listen, and keep listening some more. The Voice of the Lord is the Word of God and speaks to our heart and mind.

Samuel hears the *What?* and is confused. Was it a *Booming God Voice* or a still small voice as he was lying in readiness for sleep? We don't know but it causes me to wonder, if, when, how has God's Voice come to me unrecognized and therefore unattended.

But Eli had the perfect solution, if Samuel hears - or thinks he hears - God calling, simply say, *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening*. After all, the Psalm is very clear about what the Lord knows about us as we were knitted together in our mother's womb by God. God knows our beginning and end.

And when life is feeling especially dark, and uncertain, Paul reminds us that it is *God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness"...the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus... .*

I will conclude with few thoughts from the gospel reading: God instituted the Sabbath for human rest. If someone was unable to gather enough food the day before, should they be expected to go hungry for the sake of the letter of the law, or be denied healing? Jesus didn't think so.

But listen for all the grains of truth that fall around us and pile up, and we fear disturbing the heap, we may become insensitive to the genuine needs of others. Let us release ourselves from only hearing the truth we want rather than the truth that is.

As we follow God's call to Sabbath rest, we will begin to recognize when and why we have allowed our own hearts to be hardened. Let us cease our rejection of the heartless by being heart-full. *Let light shine out of darkness... Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening* for the bushels of truth you offer.

As believers our focus should be on the Word of God. They are life and healing to us when we keep them in our hearts. Let us shift our focus from wealth, fame and power to God's Word that is able to take care of all our needs.

Let us release ourselves, through Sabbath rest, from hardness of heart and fear of the heartless. *Let light shine out of darkness...Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

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