

*Lost in Conversation*

1 Samuel 3: 1-10

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The earpods I got last year to help with Zoom calls are definitely my favorite piece of pandemic technology. Actually I can take them anywhere that my phone can go. I used to mock those men in airports baying into their bluetooth earpieces with exaggerated gesticulations. Get ahold of yourself, I would think of these men so lost in conversation they forgot they were in public. I hope I'm never so out of touch. But now that Apple has made it so cool to talk on the phone without holding a phone in your hand I can hardly function without my earpods. I call my parents on them while I'm walking the dog. I stream music while I'm cleaning the gutters or raking leaves. In the evenings I cook dinner listening to the podcasts I would be embarrassed for Jackson to know I listen to. These earpods are so amazing because they can manipulate the air pressure in your ears to cancel extraneous noise. When I click the button to engage the noise cancellation I can identify all the sounds that are being clipped from my environment as they are fading away - sounds that I was hearing but not noticing before. There was a barking dog down the street now fading into silence. The chirping birds were surprisingly loud, but now, nothing. If I pay attention I can notice the softest sounds extinguished. Air quietly moving around the building - muted. Of course I can get into all sorts of trouble blissed out on my ear buds. Getting my attention is hopeless unless you physically touch me. Or, in one instance when I was standing on top of a ladder, shaking it. I was lost in conversation with my brother last week, using my earbuds, when he interrupted - hey, what's that sound? Turns out he could hear in Washington, DC oil on my stovetop sizzling out of control. I'm glad he said something.

I share this with you of course because it's so amusing to recognize all the things I miss even when I think I'm paying attention. Isn't it something that I don't appreciate all the sounds around me until I can notice them fading away. How much is there to appreciate in what I usually dismiss as mere background noise? It sure makes you wonder - how much more goes unnoticed or and unappreciated in relationships that matter to us, or in conversations important to us. It's humbling to consider how much we're not hearing even when we think we're listening.

The first substantive introduction we're given to the great biblical judge Samuel is his famous lesson in listening. A few things to note about this story. First, it's set in a difficult and perilous moment in history. Samuel's calling takes place before Israel has a settled capital, an installed monarch, or much security as a people. His lifetime is the tail end of the tenure of the judges, which has been marked mainly by tribal conflict and environmental disaster. Or to use the narrator's artful phrase, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days." A second point is that even on those rare occasions when God does speak these are not people known for their active listening skills. The sons of Eli, the priest in charge, have corrupted the temple cult by intimidating the people and stealing from the public sacrifice. The biblical narrator calls them scoundrels whose unprincipled leadership has had unsurprising consequences. The people have diminishing confidence in the public good, vanishing trust in the temple's authority, and sadly even under all this stress and strain even decreasing faith in God's presence among them. Does any of this sound familiar to us?

These are the circumstances of the young Samuel's confusion. He hears his name called but because the temple cult has been so corrupted he has not yet been taught to listen to the voice

of God. Assuming that Eli must be calling his name, three times he answers the elder priest who finally recognizes what must be happening. Don't mistake the threefold pattern here merely as playful illustration of God's mystery and childhood learning. The threefold pattern speaks volumes not just about all that Samuel has to learn but how much Eli has forgotten. Should not the priest in charge of the temple cult know how to recognize the voice of the Lord? The story suggests that Eli has fallen out of the practice of listening. The story illustrates how Eli's family has been paying attention to all of the wrong things. They have lost themselves in their own occupations and concerns so that when the voice of God speaks they have no ear for it. So God says to Samuel - you better look, listen and feel - because I'm about to do things that will make both ears of everyone in Israel tingle with the voice of the Lord.

This amusing tale is a great story for children. "Samuel, Samuel." "Here I am. You called me." But for all the adults in the room, we have to hear this text from the seat of Eli. From that perspective the Good News today has an edge that will cut. The voice of the Lord is not gently calling our names anymore. Our ears ring with the cry of our exasperated God - "What do I have to do to get your attention!" How plainly does it need to be spelled out for us? We are humbled by the trivial matters that occupy us when greater demand our consciousness. We feel convicted by the many signs that we might have noticed before but were met with no action on our part. We confess that we haven't always been listening closely, that we've fallen out of the practice of noticing, that we have not had ears to hear what God has been saying all along.

None of what I am saying is meant to exclude those who truly can't hear or those whose hearing is failing. This text is only using a strong metaphor for the multiplicity of signs and symbols, words and actions, events and movements, images and sensations that God uses to communicate with us. God's presence is alive to us if we are just awake. We can learn how to listen to God by practicing how God listens to us. The Psalmist proclaims that the communication between God and people goes both ways. "O Lord you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away...even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely." In other words, God is patiently listening to our prayers. The Psalmist goes on to describe how her prayers have brought her into the practice of listening to God. "How weighty are your thoughts to me," she says. "I try to count them -- they are more than the sand. I come to the end -- I am still with you."

God is a constant and faithful presence with us, speaking with us and listening to us, sharing with us, revealing to us.

Hey by the way, what's that noise? Is the kitchen on fire? Maybe you should take those things out of your ears.