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The National Presbyterian Church

Samuel's Prayer: Speak Up, Lord

1 Samuel 3:1-11

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In our sermons in recent weeks we've been looking together at the topic of prayer. In fact we've been focusing in particular on different prayers that we find in the pages of Holy Scripture. There are many prayers scattered throughout the pages of scripture. We're focusing on just a handful of those prayers.

- We've spent a great deal of time looking at the prayer that our Lord Jesus teaches us. You find it in the sixth Chapter of the gospel according to Saint Matthew right in the middle of a section called The Sermon on the Mount. We've been looking at The Lord's Prayer.
- We've also been looking at a prayer prayed by Moses, one of the great figures of the Old Testament. You'll find this in the Old Testament book of Exodus in Chapters three and four when Moses is called by God to become kind of a savior, to deliver His people from slavery in Egypt and lead them to the Promised Land. And Moses wrestles with God in this prayer. It's a back and forth conversation. Doesn't seem like a prayer but that is what prayer is, a conversation with God. And in that prayer he wrestles with God.
- And then last week Donna Marsh was preaching and preached on a woman whose name is Hannah, who prayed to God. We don't hear much about Hannah in the pages of scripture except in that particular passage, 1 Samuel 2. She's a woman who is facing great pain and difficulty in her life. She cannot bear children. It's the question of infertility, and she comes with her pain and her sorrow and her anguish, and she pours it out before God. One person who hears her is a man called Eli, who, because she is so passionate,

thinks that she's drunk; it's so painful, it's so personal. But this is her prayer and God hears her prayer.

Sometimes God hears and the answer is 'no', sometimes 'yes'; in this case it was yes. She prays for a child and that child is born. She has a son.

- And today we come to the prayer of that child who was born. His name is Samuel, the child born to Hannah and we come to his brief prayer that we read of in our scripture reading in the third Chapter of First Samuel. And he prays this simple prayer. Speak Lord, for your servant is listening. *Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.*

Let me give you a little background about Samuel before we begin to think about this simple prayer.

Samuel is one of the great figures in Israel's ancient history. Not quite at the same level as Moses but right up there. Samuel served God at a time of enormous transition and danger in the life of ancient Israel. At this particular time, about 1050 years before the birth of Jesus, the tribes of Israel have settled into, Palestine, the Promised Land. But they become divided. They aren't united. And their enemies are strong; their enemies *are* united. And they're about to destroy the people of Israel. Well Samuel comes onto the scene and he binds the tribes together and he prepares them for a real change in their life together in which they will become a united nation under the royal leadership of King David.

But this is a difficult time, a difficult moment, and he is the one who rises to leadership and brings the people together when there's no one else to do it. And the question that has to be asked about his life is this: *What were the influences in his life? What made an impact in his life that led him to be that person whom God could use at that particular moment for that important and critical work?*

When we look at his life there are two influences that we can see very clearly that change the course of his life.

The Impact of Samuel's mother, Hannah. One is one that I've mentioned already, the influence of his mother Hannah who not only prayed that he would be born, but prayed that God would take care of him and use him in his life – made sure that she in a sense having received him from God, handed him back to God. She saw her child

not just as hers and hers alone, but as a gift from God, a child of whose life she was a steward, and her job was to take that life, shape that life, hand that life back to God.

In her particular case she did something that I wouldn't recommend you do. In handing that life back to God, as a three-year-old her son, Samuel, began to live in the temple, in the presence of God in the temple at a place called Shiloh. That would be like you giving me your children when they're three years of age and saying "you're going to be living in National Presbyterian Church from this moment on!" and I would say "No thank you I don't think I'm going to do that!"

But the point is that she saw her child in relationship to his relationship to God, just as we do spiritually when it comes to baptism. This is in fact exactly what's going on in baptism. When our children are baptized we are recognizing that our children aren't ours alone. But they've been entrusted to our care. They are more fundamentally children of God, and we are beginning to hand them back to the God who gave our children to us, the God who cares more for them than we do, who wants to take and use our children in God's service throughout their lives. And God is saying in the water of baptism I will care for them as much if not more than you. This child is mine: a child of God.

So Hannah's influence impact was powerful on Samuel's life just as our impact as parents can be on our children. And that was one of the great influences in his life but the other is the situation that took place in the scripture reading that we just read in the third Chapter of First Samuel; an experience of God even in childhood that changed the course and the direction of Samuel's life.

The Impact of A Childhood Experience. Some of you are familiar with Samuel's story, but let me share with you the broad strokes of this story again. It's nighttime. Samuel is a young boy. We don't know what age he is. Maybe he's third grade, fourth grade, somewhere around that particular age. He's a young boy. He's living in the temple. He's going to bed. It's nighttime. And there as he goes to sleep he hears a voice and it's not any voice. It's a voice that's calling his name – Samuel, Samuel. And the only one he can figure who knows his name is a man called Eli. Eli is the high priest. He's the guardian of the temple. He's the guardian of Samuel. And Samuel goes to Eli and says, "You called

me?" And Eli says, "I didn't call you." And this happens three times – "Samuel, Samuel". . . "Eli, you called me?" "No, I didn't call you."

By the time it's happened three times Eli begins to twig what's going on. Eli's life and his ministry at this stage had been compromised. His own sons are profligate, they're promiscuous, they're greedy, they have despised God's work in the temple. But Eli remembers one thing that's absolutely critical. Even though his life is not as it ought to be, what he remembers is this. That *the God of Israel, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob is a God who speaks*. It's foundational to who God is. In the pages of scripture God is a God who speaks. He speaks and creation comes into being, life emerges (Genesis 1). This is who God is, and Eli, in forgetting much else, remembers this much. And that God is no respecter of persons and that God can speak even to a child, to a child like Samuel. And so he says to Samuel, "Samuel if this happens again this is what you are to do. You are to reply like this: '*Speak Lord, for Your servant is listening.*'"

And sure enough Samuel goes back to bed, he lies down and he hears his name being called again, "Samuel, Samuel." And he says, "*Speak Lord, for Your servant is listening.*" This was his prayer. This was perhaps his first prayer. A very simple prayer but it was a prayer that changed his life and the course of history for the people of Israel:

God spoke in answer to that prayer, and kept on speaking to Samuel and Samuel kept on speaking that word to others. And it became a word that the people trusted and that brought them together under his leadership at a time of crisis.

Such a simple prayer that anyone can pray: *Speak Lord, for Your servant is listening.*

Now there are some people who have a sense of God speaking and its commonplace within their lives. Some people have this sense and nothing can take it away and it's powerful within their lives. But not everybody has the sense that God speaks to them or speaks clearly to them. And even those people who do have that sense that God does speak clearly to them sometimes go through what theologians describe as "the dark night of the soul," where there is no voice, where God seems to be far, far away and absolutely silent.

Stanley Baldwin, not the British Prime Minister but the author and pastor, an American, wrote a book some years ago called *Bruised but Not Broken* (1985) in which he writes of such an experience that he had like

this, and that he shared with his congregation. In fact he shared it with them on a Communion Sunday just as we are gathered here on a Communion Sunday today. He writes:

I remember one Communion service especially well. There was no particular reason for me to feel estranged from God. The edge was simply off my spiritual sensitivity. Our Communion services were becoming routine and flat. In twenty years as pastor I'd probably administered the Lord's Supper at least 300 times. On this occasion I decided to bring the problem to the Lord openly before the whole congregation at the Communion service. I suspected others felt as I did and would identify with my prayer:

Sometimes I feel your presence, sometimes I don't, not even in church.

Sometimes I really don't, I sense your absence and some of us may well feel the same. Jesus, are You here? What about that song he goes on to say that describes me, the song that goes "My heart is night, my soul is steel. I cannot see, I cannot feel?" Ah yes, I know it continues, "for light, for life I must appeal; in simple faith to Jesus," but am I kidding myself when I say that you are here, unknown to our senses but still here. Jesus? Jesus? Are you really here?

The silence of God sometimes can be overwhelming. And this can be the experience, not just of ordinary everyday Christians, but it can be the experience of those who are utterly faithful to God in ways beyond our imagination. One of those who experienced the sense of the silence of God perhaps more than others is Mother Theresa. Some of you know her story well. Others know bits and pieces of it. But there is no doubt to me that in the fall of 1944 she *heard* God speak. In fact she could pinpoint it to September 10, 1944, and the days and the weeks surrounding that particular time, especially when she was on a train journey to a place of rest from being a principal in a school in Calcutta. And that word from God told her to leave her work as a school principal and to go and serve and care for the poor and dying in the streets and the slums of that city. Mother Theresa called that experience an experience of "The Voice." Not like the television program that's popular today, but *the* voice which is more powerful than any other voice, telling her to leave what she was doing and change her manner of life. And at the heart of that voice were some very clear words: "Come be my light!" Come be my light!

Now some of you may have read a book about Mother Theresa's correspondence which is called by the same name, *Come Be My Light*, (published in 2007, Brian Kolodiejchuk, editor). What is staggering about the book is this: that as you read through Mother Theresa's correspondence you discover that *this one who heard this straightforward life-changing voice went through many months and many years of feeling the deep and dark absence of God in her life*. She had no doubt that she was doing the will of God. She still had no doubt about that. But the sense of closeness was gone. The sense that there was someone speaking was gone. And she describes this in her correspondence – even for this great saint.

For ordinary Christians of all kinds there are times, then, when God is going to seem rather silent. What we need to know, though, is that this happens even in the lives of those God clearly speaks to!

But what if our experience is not of God *sometimes* being silent, but of God *always* being silent? What if we believe that God would never speak to me? For whatever reason: sure God speaks, God speaks to others, but not to me?

I suppose I would respond to that assertion by saying that that's the place where Samuel's experience and prayer become really important; and I'd ask if you had ever prayed Samuel's simple prayer, the prayer of a young boy: *"Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening."* Do we have that sense of expectation that this is a consistent aspect of God's way of operating which is not just for the great saints, but it's for all Christians, because God foundationally is a God (as Eli remembered) who speaks? Who is filling the universe with His voice? And who wants to communicate – not just to those who seem perfectly righteous but even to a child like Samuel? Eli remembered that! Thank goodness! And told Samuel to pray to God, at a time when God's voice was rare, and say, *"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."*

The problem is not with God: the universe is filled not only with radio waves but with God's voice. So the question, ultimately, is this: are we tuning in? Are we on the right wavelength? Are we on the right frequency? And if we *do* hear God's voice, *will we follow?*

"Speak, Lord, for your servant [that's who I am] is listening."

Do we believe that this prayer is God's prayer for us too?

This is critical for us to believe. But even if we do, there's another question which I know bothers many people and it's this: if we do pray

that prayer, and if I am listening for God, and if I think that I hear God's voice, what's the possibility that the voice I hear is not God's voice but just my voice, my imagination, my paranoia, and I blame it on God as it were? How do we tell whether it's God's voice or not? I want to tune in Lord and I want to listen and I want to obey, but how do I know that it's the voice of God?

This is actually a really good question and one that Mother Theresa herself asked. She well understood that the voice in her head had to be checked and double checked (like our government there had to be checks and balances) especially with those who were her spiritual superiors. Indeed we know about her personal experiences, which she rarely spoke about, precisely because in her correspondence she checks it out with others. And, further, she also made sure that the voice she heard and the call she experienced was in line with the person of Jesus of whom she read in the pages of scripture: this call felt like the call of the Jesus she had known from reading the biblical gospels.

And those two checks on the voice in her head (her conscience), (1) the word of God in the scripture and (2) the word from those who were her spiritual mentors and advisors kept her on God's path.

Let me bring this up to date and put it into another context. So God is speaking. God is in the atmosphere. We know this. We all carry with us receivers in our pockets. Almost every one of us has something in our pocket that if it's tuned-in we'll be able to listen to somebody far away. It's coming at us from every direction here and now. The question is this. Are we tuned in to God and in particular are we tuned in to the right network? Do we have the right network? If you're tuned in to the wrong network you'll never hear God.

- You won't hear God if you just tune in to CBS. You won't hear God if you just tune in to ABC or NBC or CNN. And for some of you this is surprising, you won't hear God if you just tune in to Fox News or MSNBC!!

There's only one station you need to tune in to if you're going to hear God. You know what station that is? This should come as no surprise, since you know me. The station you have to tune into if you want to hear God clearly is... the BBC!

No! Not the British Broadcasting Corporation – you may or may not hear God on the British Broadcasting Corporation – but you

most certainly will, if you tune in to (1) the **B**ible; if you tune in to (2) your fellow **B**elievers and if you tune into (3) your **C**onscience.

And this is work! This kind of listening is work – to read your Bible in such a way that it reforms your conscience. Conscience alone is not a clear enough indication that God is speaking. Our consciences are molded and shaped and misshaped by the culture around about us. And our job is to reshape our consciences or to allow God to reshape our consciences, to speak into and through our consciences through the scriptures. And not just through the Scriptures, but constantly reshaping and molding our consciences in conversation with other believers as well.

We tend to forget that for most of Christianity there was no such thing as a pocket Bible. You read your Bible in the context of a community, or you heard it read in the context of a community and immediately there would be a discussion of the word – through which God would speak and guide.

Within the context of the **B**ible and within the context of our fellow **B**elievers and in the context of our **C**onscience, at times when all kinds of voices are coming to us, or none at all, God will speak and we can hear, and be given the grace to follow where God wants us to go too.

The first word he got was not a word he wanted. He was going to speak of the downfall of Eli's house. As a child he was given this word. But he persisted in following where God led, and God took that word he spoke to Samuel and used it, speaking through Samuel to the lives of others. So Samuel led a life powerfully impacted by God at a critical moment in the history of God's ancient people.

Impacted by the power of a parent praying for a child, saying "This is not my child alone. This Lord is your child. Let me hand my child back to you for you to use and call because ultimately my child is a child of God." That powerful impact of a parent!

And the powerful impact of hearing and listening to a word from God, even in childhood.

And if God could do this with Samuel in childhood surely God could do this with us as well. God was calling him by name and he prayed this simple prayer: ***Speak Lord, for your servant,*** that's who we are, ***is listening.*** And God spoke.