

HEARING AND OBEYING

'He told Samuel to go and lie down and said: 'If someone calls once more, say, "Speak, Lord; your servant is listening.'"' (I Samuel 3:9)

It is said that the State of Maine has some of the most reticent of characters in these United States. Many are the stories of the taciturn way in which they engage with visitors and especially with tourists. Indeed at one time the State Tourist Bureau, rather unsuccessfully, mounted a campaign to counteract this image of the laconic Mainiac. Typical of the stories is the one about the Maine farmer who was asked directions to the city of Bangor by a tourist who had been riding around the back roads of upper Maine, and was horribly lost. The farmer very politely gave him a long and complicated set of directions, which the tourist followed very carefully. An hour later he found himself back in the exact same spot from which he had started, with the farmer leaning on the gate apparently not having moved in the last hour or so. The tourist was baffled, and somewhat indignant and accused the farmer of having given him misleading directions. "Indeed not," said the farmer, "You have followed the directions very well." "So," said the tourist, "How did I get back to this starting point when I wanted to get to Bangor?" "Well," said the farmer, "I wanted to make sure you could follow my directions before I spent the time to tell you how to get to Bangor!"

The trouble with Samuel, so the tale goes, was that he could hear the directions, but couldn't follow them. He could hear the call, but did not recognize where it was coming from. There is, after all, a difference between hearing something and understanding it, and what Samuel had to learn was that he not only had to hear the voice of God, but also that he needed to properly discern it was God he was hearing.

Just as Samuel in his earliest responses, we hear too often without understanding. Samuel's problem at first was simply that his imagination was too narrowly focused. When he heard the call in the night all he could think was that Eli was calling him. He was so caught up with the everyday noise that it simply had to be Eli; there could be nothing else. We are so used to looking and listening to our world as the only context of our lives that we do not look beyond it. We live life only as it appears to us in the day-to-day pattern of our lives.

Isn't it enough to have to deal with what faces us in our daily lives? We can and do move with the flow of daily life not looking beyond what that life has to offer. But what about those moments when that flow of life seems to become a little choppy – when we are faced with some difficult decision, for example? Sometimes that easy flow of life is stopped short when we are faced with some difficult moral decision – or when we are faced with a dilemma of how to treat another person?

Jesus, you remember, brought his disciples up short when he told them a story about a man injured and lying at the side of the road. Passing by on the road were a priest and a Levite. They passed the injured man by while a Samaritan, who was also passing on the road, went to his help. The story is about the one who helped was the one who would have been deemed most unlikely to help in this situation. What Jesus was telling the disciples was that the priest and the Levite, although they were the ones who claimed to have religious sensitivity, did not hear the voice of God in this very ordinary situation. They did not understand the situation as one in which God was making a claim upon them because they thought that God was only to be found in prayer and the obedience to some formulaic law.

Helping an injured man was such a simple act, but one must feel the need to respond, and the willingness to respond comes only when the moral demand of the situation is accepted. The point of the story is that the voice of God speaks to the three who passed by on the road, **but only one of the three heard that voice**. To hear and to understand that God speaks in the ordinary things of life, that is one of the things that Samuel's call teaches us. The voice came to him **in his place of work**, in the context of helping the prophet Eli, as they cared for the temple of worship. Samuel did not at first understand that.

But, what we, like Samuel, have to come to understand is – in the words of Thoreau:

"Within the circuit of this plodding live
There enter moments of an azure hue."

There is more to life than life itself.

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But it might be said not that Samuel did not understand that the call was a call from God, but that he simply got the wrong message. Though it happened many years ago I still remember the horror of seeing the mass suicide of the followers of Bob Jones in Guiana. What was so unfathomable was the unthinking acceptance of the leader's words. Bob Jones had become a god-substitute. The charismatic leader mesmerized the people who followed him and in the name of God a mistaken message of fear and hate was accepted.

How can we misunderstand the message of God? In circumstances like that of Bob Jones one sees in him someone who has lost the sense of distance between himself and God. This is often the problem with charismatic leaders. They speak with the kind of assurance that their words are not simple human, but divine – so that their demands upon their followers become absolute in every way. This, very often, is the clue to misunderstanding the word of God. When human agency takes on the absolute claim of assurance, then it is time to puzzle over that claim and its source. And we must always remember that the human source can never be absolute.

In understanding the messages of God we need to be very sure that we know and understand our messenger. Though I am reminded of Judas in those last days of Jesus and the part he played in that final drama. Judas was a disciple, after all, and he was one of the brethren. He had heard and accepted Jesus, so there must have been something about the message that attracted Judas to him. What was it that went wrong – was it really only greed? There is one interpretation of Judas' action that centers upon the fact that there were at that time a number of nationalist groups that were determined to free the people from the Roman yoke by insurrection of some sort. Judas, the theory goes, thought that Jesus was such a leader interested in political freedom for the people of Israel, and so when it became clear that Jesus was interested in freedom the human spirit Judas felt betrayed. Judas had misunderstood the message because he placed the material political benefit before the greater claim that Jesus presented.

We need always to be aware of those who proclaim human and temporal certainties. They represent the shallow and impermanent in terms of divine commands.

But Eli finally guessed what was happening to young Samuel. And it is to Eli's credit that he did begin to understand what was happening. After all he could have kept it to himself for if God was going to speak to Samuel it must mean that God was no longer going to use Eli as his spokesman. God was choosing a new prophet to speak for him, and it is to Eli's greater humility that he was willing to accept that fact in his life.

It was Eli who put Samuel in the picture and told him of the context of the voice in the night. We all need the wise teacher who selflessly give us some understanding of what it is that we are to listen for in life; and for all of Eli's faults he was a good teacher for Samuel. He pointed to the things that Samuel would have to listen for and he taught Samuel how to understand the signs and portents of the night.

It was Eli who taught Samuel to discern the source of the message. But it was Samuel who had to be willing to hear the message and to fully understand its meaning. And it was a hard message for Eli, for it proclaimed the end of Eli as a prophet and the end of his influence.

We have something to learn from both Samuel and Eli. From Eli we have to learn that not all the things we have to understand from God are easy for us to take. We are sometimes commanded to do things that we do not particularly want to do. Moral commands and moral demands upon us are sometimes hard for us to take. The temptations that Jesus faces in the desert before he started his ministry demonstrate to us the depth of the difficulty that we face. Jesus was faced with a way of dealing with his ministry in such a way that he could simply demonstrate his divine power – give bread and people will flock to you. Do miracles and demonstrate your power over nature – and people will fall at your feet. The easy way was there before Jesus, and he turned his back upon that easy way. Not all our choices are easy in life, and we are not always asked to follow the easy path. The road less traveled is the one we sometimes have to take. And that is not always the easiest road to navigate.

But it is important to realize that God does not speak to us in special voices, or in extraordinary ways. It was Martin Buber who said: "God made no tools for himself, he needs none; he created for himself a partner in the dialogue of time, and one who is capable of holding converse." Samuel's gift was not extraordinary – it was Eli who had to tell him to listen so that he could hear and interpret the voice of God. God speaks to us in the demands of our daily lives, and the choices we make in response to those demands create the possibility of his

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speaking through us to the world. We are capable of hearing and understanding because God has made us so. It was in service to God that Samuel learned his trade as a prophet, and it is in service and love of God, not in arid dogma, that we find His fulfillment in us through our action in our world.

What Samuel learned was that it is not simply a matter of what you hear and see in this world, but how you understand what you hear and see. How we live depends upon how we perceive our place in the world, whether we see ourselves merely as inhabiting an empty sphere of a world that has no meaning other than that we impose upon it, or whether we see the world as one created by God and which we inhabit because he has made us. How we live becomes significantly different as we see ourselves within such a created world. The Priest and the Levite had used religion as a barrier between themselves and God's world. To see God's call in the needs and cares of what is around us – that is the lesson from the simple kindness of the Samaritan.

It is in Samuel's willingness to obey God's command that his work was fulfilled. However reticent he was to obey, it was in that obedience that the hearing of God's word becomes meaningful. And so it is for us. We might discern the right path to follow as we encounter God's command in our everyday life, but it is in the working out of that command in the daily activity of our living that makes the truth of God clear to those around us.

We need to look and listen to the world around us, to what happens to our neighbors and our friends and to our enemies. God is speaking to us through their needs and their concerns. The Priest and the Levite did not see the need and so walked by on the other side of the road. It is when we see what is needed of us that we will hear and obey the voice of God in the world today and stop and act.

“If someone calls...say: “Speak Lord: your servant is listening.”

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