

“God is Speaking---Are You Listening?”

1 Samuel 3

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The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. (1 Samuel 3:1)

The word of the Lord is rare these days, too. Our situation is arguably just as grim (maybe even more so) than the one faced by Eli and Samuel near the end of the time of the Judges. It was a time when “everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Sound familiar? Could have been written yesterday, but it wasn’t. It was written some 2800 years ago, during the period of the judges, just before the era of Israel’s great kings.

No doubt we are living in tough times. Even we believers sometimes have trouble hanging onto the idea that God continues to be active and involved in our collective lives. With all the noise around us, it’s hard to hear God speak these days.

The state of Israel is at war within itself; things haven’t been this bad in the Middle East in nearly a decade. We live in an especially fearful time, with threats of global and local terrorism, a deep recession all over the world, the sites of wars, starvation, and civil unrest too numerous to count, and a general sense that life is unraveling in unpredictable ways. The word of God seems a feeble whisper in the face of all this. And yet, we believe, **the lamp of God [has] not yet gone out** (1 Sam 3:8).

We know the lamp of God has not yet gone out because we can still see God’s light. We know the lamp of God has not yet gone out because there are those who continue to commit their very lives to keep it burning. We know the lamp has not yet gone out because we continue to hope. We continue to hope for God to speak; and out of that speech, we hope for something new to happen.

"See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. (1 Samuel 3:11)

The Hebrew word here, translated as tingle, can also be translated as “buzz” or “quiver”. When God does something new, it makes your ears tingle and the hair on the back of your neck stand up.

At the time of Samuel's call, Israel was about to fall apart. The religious leadership had become corrupt. Eli's own sons were part of this corruption. Israel was at a crossroads, and God starts talking.

Whatever your political persuasion, it is plain to see we are at a crossroads right now. Two days from now, we will inaugurate a new president and a whole new administration for the first time in eight years. A new president, of a new generation, of a race which has never before in U.S. history held this office. It is the moment of a lifetime. One newswriter put it in this spine-tingling way: "Our newest president. . .has a wife whose ancestors were chattel in Lincoln's era"¹ Yes, it may be symbolic, and yes, we still have a long way to go, but it makes the hairs on your neck stand on end to consider how far we've come in the last fifty years.

Recently there have been many comparisons made between President-Elect Obama and President Abraham Lincoln. Some of these comparisons are no doubt fueled by similarities of the person (tall, gaunt, intelligent, introspective) but they are also fueled by similarities of the situation. A country in crisis. Wars that seem unending. A need for decisive leadership. A need to repair the nation.

This is not to argue that Obama is the next "Abraham Lincoln". And it is certainly not to argue he is a prophet anointed by God. It is simply to say that we at least need to be *open to the possibility* that God could use this administration in a prophetic way, just as God has used other political leaders. God might use *this leader* to inspire needed change. Of course, it could go the other way, too.

This is the situation Samuel finds himself in as well. Samuel's context is also about a change in leadership---the end of the old guard and the beginning of the new. Samuel is called by God in a time of spiritual desolation, religious corruption, political danger, and social upheaval.

But this is not all we see here. We also hear in this scripture an accent on the *power of speech*. The power of God's speech, and the power of prophetic speech. Both are nearly wiped out at the beginning of the story, but by the end, we hear prophetic speech coming on fast and furious. By the end of this chapter, Samuel has been anointed and appointed and set loose for the Hebrew people.

¹ Christopher Hitchens, "The Man Who Made Us Whole" Newsweek, January 19, 2009.

There are many who say “Oh, it’s just oratory; it’s just words”. Beware when you hear that! Word are powerful. As a preacher, words are all I have. Words not only inform, they transform. Words not only enlighten, they enflame. Words can be used as instruments of good or weapons of evil. Powerful orators use speech to do great harm as well as great good. Words are never “just words.” And as one who believes in God’s Word, I am convinced beyond a doubt of the power of the Holy Spirit to illuminate God’s Living Word to us today, and I am also convinced of the possibility of human speech to reflect God’s word.

At the time of the Judges, Israel was in desperate need to return to God, and Israel was desperate for some word from God. Prophetic leadership was missing (the lamp of God’s word was nearly out!).

Today we are also in desperate need of prophetic leaders. We need prophetic leaders inside the church, but we also need prophetic leaders outside the church. We can only pray our new president will deliver. In the current issue of Newsweek, Anna Quindlen addresses the President-Elect: “Your inaugural address looms, and the weight of both history and reputation is upon you. There is a sense that this should be a great speech, a momentous speech, a speech to make the hair rise on the neck and the heart sing in the breast.” She goes on to say, “speech is the voice of the heart. . .[the people want] grandeur, the big ideas, the great thoughts [from their president]. . .”²

It’s not just great words put in great ways, but it is the great vision we long to see, the prophetic voice we need to hear.

The prophetic **voice** speaks to the big picture. The prophetic **vision** sees things others cannot see. The prophetic **mind** thinks outside the box. The prophetic **will** dares to go there. It helps to be a great wordsmith, but being a great wordsmith is *never* enough. The content of the message is *never* enough if the content of character is lacking.

The prophetic voice is often a lonely voice, because this voice **speaks** the truth to power. This voice often **goes against** the grain, this voice **afflicts** the affluent, **defends** the downtrodden, **insists** on justice, **sympathizes** with sinners, **sends** the rich empty away. Sounds like gospel.

God’s prophetic word contains not just good news, not merely poetic platitudes. God’s word contains powerful demand and painful sacrifice. This happened to Samuel. Turns out he is given a preview of

² Anna Quindlen, “Era of Good Speaking”, Newsweek, January 19, 2009.

Eli's death sentence. Samuel would rather keep this bad news (this news of God's justice) to himself.

Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli.
(1 Samuel 3:15)

Don't be deceived by the dreamlike setting of Samuel's story. This is not some sweet story of a young boy saying "yes" to God. This is a story of profound change, the kind of change that happens when God speaks. The word God places on Samuel is frightening, both for the demands it places on him and also for the grim message it delivers to Eli. Samuel does not shrink from his task. He tells Eli the truth, painful though it is. Samuel speaks his first prophetic words in the moment he delivers the message to Eli:

So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him.

How does Eli respond? What does Eli do? Not what you might expect. Eli hears God's word in the words Samuel spoke. Eli knows God's will in the terrible pronouncement coming from the young boy's lips. And Eli submits.

Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him." (1 Samuel 3:18)

It is Eli's acceptance of the terrible verdict from God: the end of his priestly line, indeed the end of his very life---this is where the rubber meets the road. It is not the "Here I am, Lord" whisper of a young boy that tells us of God's claim, but rather the pronouncement by an old man, "Let it be; it is God". In his obedience it is Eli who shows us how to respond when God speaks.

The word of God doesn't usually come as a voice in the night, although it can.

Sometimes it is delivered by one we would not expect.
Let's watch, and wait, and listen.