

Distinguishing God's Voice - 1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20) – June 28, 2009

I have one major phobia in life and that is birds flying anywhere around my head. I know it is sad but it is true. So no big surprise – a bird is one pet I have never owned. But I still love the story Rev. Schuyler Rhodes tells of when he was a boy and his family had a parakeet. The bird's name was "Beauty." According to Rhodes, Beauty was a bird like most. She spent most of her life in the cage poking at a mirror and singing while his mom played classical music. She was quite tame, and they all loved playing with her.

One special skill that she acquired, however, was whistling. In fact, she was able to perfectly copy the whistle that his dad used to call their pet dog. It was amazing he says. You really couldn't tell whether it was his dad or the bird whistling. Neither could the dog. Often, two or three times a day, they could hear that shrill dog whistle come from the living room. The dog would jump up and run looking for his dad, only to find the room empty. Well, mostly empty.

Okay – Rhodes goes on to say - so the dog wasn't too bright. But one day, finally, the bird whistled, and the dog came running. Only this time the dog skidded to a halt right in front of the table that hosted the birdcage. He looked up, cocked one ear, and it was as though you could see the light going on — albeit a little slowly. That was the last time that dog got fooled by that bird again.

I guess it's important to know who it is that is calling you. Otherwise, things could get a little sticky, wouldn't you agree? For that reason, it is pretty hard to purchase a phone these days – any kind of phone - that doesn't show you what number is calling you. With all the ridiculous sales calls most of us receive, I must admit it is great to see

one of my family member's names on the little screen when my phone rings. It is good to know who it is that is calling.

One time a friend of mine, who was a pastor in New York City, got a call in her office. She picked up the phone and answered in her usual combination of pastoral welcome and professional wariness. The voice on the other end said, "Hello, Pastor Jones? This is the White House calling." Assuming it was one of her jokester friends, she said, "Sure," and hung up. The phone rang again and the process repeated itself, not once but twice more, until on the fourth try the voice on the other end said, "Please don't hang up! This really is the White House calling!" It turns out that my friend was being invited to the White House for an important consultation on urban concerns. It's good to know who is calling.

This can be important in our day-to-day lives as well. As I said, things could get sticky if you don't know who you are talking to. But the stakes get even higher when God enters the picture. What happens when you start hearing voices? What if it is God? What if it is not God? There are whole wards in hospitals filled with people who think they hear God. A once heard someone say that these special folks really gave him cause for concern, because "what if one of them really turns out to be talking with God? What do we do then?"

Today, we encounter the boy Samuel as he apprentices under Eli. In those days, like today, "The word of the Lord was rare, and visions were not widespread." In the temple, Samuel lays down to take a nap. His mentor does the same in another room. Then, scripture tells us, "The Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' "Thinking, as most of us would, that Eli was calling from the other room, he jumped up and ran to him and said,

"Here I am, what do you want?" Eli looks up from his nap and grumbles at him. "I didn't call you. Go lay down again."

As some of you may remember, this process went on for a while, with God calling and Samuel thinking that it was Eli. The third time this happened, it began to dawn on Eli that maybe somebody special was trying to get in touch with our friend Sam. So Eli told him to go back to his bed and if he heard the voice again, to simply say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." And the rest, as they say, is history. God announces to Samuel that he is going to do a new thing in Israel that will "make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." Indeed, it really is good to know whose voice it is that is calling.

I wonder if any of us would lay claim to hearing God like that? Scripture points out that the word of God was rare and visions were few. I have to wonder, though, if that is always the case. Could it be that perhaps God's word was present, and the ability to see visions was there, but people weren't necessarily open to it? Could it be that God's sacred word rings always in and around us, and it is we who really are not listening? It would certainly appear that God was the one at fault. After all, if no one is hearing God, how could God be speaking? If there are no visions, then how could God be stirring them up in people's hearts?

I have no idea if this story is true but I believe it is worth sharing and makes a great point. President Franklin D. Roosevelt got tired of smiling his big smile and saying the usual things at all the White House receptions he was required to attend. So, one evening he decided to find out whether anybody was paying attention to what he was saying. As each person came up to him with extended hand, he flashed that big smile

and said, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." People would automatically respond with comments such as "How lovely!" or "Just continue with your great work!" Nobody listened to what he was saying, except one foreign diplomat. When the president said, "I murdered my grandmother this morning," the diplomat responded softly, "I'm sure she had it coming to her."

I think it's so important that Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." Because you cannot hear if you are not listening, can you? I know, if I'm working on a sermon, someone could be knocking on the door, or even opening the door and walking right into the room, and I wouldn't hear them because my listening was focused elsewhere. Speak, for your servant is listening. It may be good to know who is calling. In fact, I would say it is a necessary part of the equation. But sisters and brothers, if we are not listening, we will never hear anything, and then we will miss the chance to try and figure out who is speaking – including God.

Wouldn't it be nice if it was that easy? I would love to be able to stand up here this morning and tell you that in order to hear, distinguish or better yet, discern God's voice all you have to do is open your ears and listen. But if that were the case, I doubt I would have received this challenging and yet important request for this morning's message which is: when we pray, when we ask for direction, when we think God is speaking to us through a sign or an inner voice - how do tell when is not just our mind telling us what we want to hear but really what God is leading us to do?

First and foremost I fear that we are so busy today there are many times we wouldn't notice God if God stepped in front of us with a bullhorn. We are so busy that our relationships with one another suffer. We are so busy that families don't eat

together, couples don't date, seniors don't sit to chew the fat. In the United States, the average worker works many more hours per week than they did a generation ago. Ten-, twelve-, fourteen-hour days are commonplace for many workers. We offer the shortest vacation periods of any industrialized nation. The economy has moved in such a way that most families require two incomes to survive. Our lives are filled with extracurricular activities, and when not filled with those things, we numb ourselves with the passive delights of television. How can we possibly make time to receive God's word in our lives?

On top of all of that discerning promptings from God is not straightforward — there are many voices competing for our attention and many of these spiritual voices are quite subtle. God does not speak to us by an audible voice - except, perhaps, in rare circumstances. His normal way of communicating is by more subtle leadings and promptings. Just as was suggested in the requesting question, God may speak through circumstances, or by an inner voice by which we know he has communicated with us, but we have not heard words. His communication may seem like a thought to us or an idea or a realization. And yet his communications have a different quality. As we grow in the ability to discern, we come to recognize his voice more frequently.

As we grow closer to God, we learn to come to know what he is really like. We come to know God's voice by coming to know God. Discernment, then, is getting to know God better. It is as if we receive a telephone call, and the line quality is very bad. The person on the end is saying that they are someone we know very well. How do we know it is them? We know because of the type of things they say, and the tone they use

to say it. If they suggest something that we know our friend would never suggest, we know it cannot be our friend on the line.

In John's Gospel, chapter ten, verses two to five we read: The shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run away from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.

In Palestine, the shepherd would walk ahead of the sheep. Even if the sheep mixed with other sheep at a waterhole, the shepherd could separate his own sheep by just calling them. They knew his voice and would follow him. A tourist in Palestine once asked a shepherd whether the sheep would ever follow anyone else. The shepherd replied, "Yes, when they are sick they will follow anyone." Once, the tourist saw a man driving a herd of sheep. When he asked about it, he was told that the man was not the shepherd, but the butcher.

I don't have to tell you that each one of us has many voices calling to us - too many, perhaps which is why I was both thrilled and scared to get this request. I am the first to admit that I have mistaken God's voice with my own and very likely the voice of other forces working in our world and in our lives many times – and the results were not good. I will spare you the gory details – at least this time but assure you that learning to distinguish God's voice does not just happen overnight. It takes lots of practice, many mistakes and a deepening maturity in one's faith in God through Jesus Christ.

One of the best ways I have found to do this is to conduct what is called commonly called a Daily Examination. Here is a recommended list of steps that I hope

you will be willing to at least give a try. Begin first, by asking the Holy Spirit to guide you. Look back on your day, and notice the gifts and blessings of God through the day, in a spirit of thankfulness.

Next, ask Jesus to teach you, and ask that you might know his voice better. Then go back over the day in your mind, looking at it with Jesus. Ask questions like:

Was I acting as the Lord would have wanted me to act?

What moved me to act in that way?

What were my feelings?

What was the first feeling that moved me to speak or act in that way?

Where did that feeling come from?

Is there anything in this event that might point to my need for healing?

What will help me the next time I encounter a similar situation?

And then end your time with praise and thanksgiving, focusing on the goodness of God. I know that is a lot but we are posting this summer series on our website for people who are out of town so feel free to go check it out and write these down so that you will remember and maybe, just maybe find them helpful.

Now some of you may well be saying – that is all fine and dandy but basically this is just one more thing to add to my already busy life. I know that many of you feel stretched and pulled by the demands of life. My intention is not to add more but to help us all make a reasoned, intentional effort to slow down enough so that we can actually hear God's voice. My not so secret desire is that we will step out of this world's hyper achievement mode long enough to hear God speaking to us and to know for sure that it is him. God is calling. Are you listening? Amen.