

Randall D. Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

17 January 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Listening Well

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning! And good morning to all of you worshipping with us at a later time in the comfort and safety of your own homes. I repeat this week what will most likely become a sermon liturgy for our time together with COVID. We worship together this morning in limited forms, but we earnestly await the day when we can worship as we once did. Let us pray! Loving and merciful God, I pray that you open our ears and hearts to what your spirit is speaking to and moving in us today. Give us the strength to listen well. In the name of King Jesus we pray. Amen.

I like to talk. I know you might be hearing this and thinking, “of course, that’s why you’re a pastor.” But I cannot speak for all pastors and say that we all like to talk, but I do. I describe myself as an external processor. I often need to speak ideas and thoughts flowing through my brain in order for those things to become real as well as for me to begin making connections between them and other ideas that I may not have considered if I had left all of the thoughts in my head. I need to talk through things in order to gain new insight as well as understand all of the details that do not always occur to me when I am in my own head. It is as if I need to pull the idea from my head and begin to mold and shape it with the spoken word so that I can gain new insight. All of that reflection aside, my affection for talking or speaking can sometimes get me into trouble. Wondering aloud can lead to comments coming out of my mouth that I do not think much about until they are out there for everyone to hear, and then I think again

about how I could have said it better after I have heard myself say it. I apologize if this is getting confusing, but what I mean to say is that in my need to externally process ideas, I have also fallen victim to not listening well because I want to talk. In the past, some have told me quite straight-forwardly that I need to work on my listening or will need to and others have told me much more nicely that I did not understand what they were saying as well as I could have.

Though I do like to talk and my need for talking might be a hindrance to my listening skills, I also know that our current political and cultural environment does not lend itself well to listening to another person's thoughts either. In many of the political debates that I have witnessed, I have wondered if the participants are listening at all to their colleagues' thoughts. I have also seen this lack of listening on social media when responses or comments have little to do with the subject of a particular post. Maybe you can think of an instance, in which you know that you were not listening well when someone was trying to have a meaningful conversation with you or, conversely, you felt like the person speaking with you was not listening well to the point that you were trying to make. Communication is vital to our relationships inside and outside the church. We must be careful to listen well to everyone that we talk to, no matter their background, skin color, political ideals, age, or gender. When we choose not to listen because of prejudice or enmity or hatred or pride, we might be missing out on something that we need to hear, that we need to take into account. Listening and listening well is exactly what our text is about today.

In 1 Samuel 3, Samuel is ministering as a young boy at Shiloh under the priest Eli. At this time in Israel's story, Shiloh is the central religious shrine for Israel, where the ark of the covenant is kept and where people bring their seasonal sacrifices as worship to God. The temple

in Jerusalem does not come until much later in the story under the reign of King Solomon, so when you read about the temple of the Lord in this story, it is the tent of meeting at Shiloh.

Samuel is a special young man, a gift to his parents from God in response to his mother's faithfulness. In the first chapter of 1 Samuel, Hannah, Samuel's mother, enters the story barren as her ancestors Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel were in Genesis. Hannah does not seem to be able to have children. She is mocked by her husband's other wife who has many children as Rachel's older sister Leah did in Genesis. Hannah weeps every year when her family comes to Shiloh to offer their sacrifices to God. She grieves in response to the mocking of her other family members and in response to her diminished status as a woman due to her lack of children. In ancient cultures, children were the only source of status that women had.

On one of these occasions at Shiloh, Hannah weeps before God and promises that if God gives her a son, she will give that son back to God in service and gratitude for such a blessing. She will dedicate her firstborn to the service and will of God as a Nazirite. God listens and responds in this particular instance. I do not know why God answered in this moment as opposed to an earlier or later moment, but God responds. Interestingly though, the other two men surrounding Hannah in the story do not listen well. Her husband makes light of her situation, acting as though his love for her should be enough to make up for her lack of children, but she knows this not true. Eli, the priest at Shiloh who takes care of the religious space and presides over the sacrifices offered there by his fellow Israelites, thinks that she is drunk as she prays to God before the altar and tells her that she should go home. She rebukes him, a strong response for a woman with no status. After hearing her explanation for her weeping, he tells her that God will grant her petition, which God does.

A great reversal happens then. Suddenly the worthless and downtrodden woman becomes the prophet and speaker for God in the second chapter of 1 Samuel. Hannah celebrates her pregnancy and soon-coming son, thanking God for hearing her pleas for blessing and announcing to everyone that the God of the Israel is a God of the lowly, the peasant, the poor, the outcast, and the hungry. God listens and responds to the cries of the oppressed, not the powerful. In fact, in the rest of chapter 2, we read about how the very people, who should be speaking on God's behalf and encouraging the people of Israel with God's promises, are doing the very opposite. The priests of the Lord, namely Eli's sons Phinehas and Hophni, are stealing the meaty portions of the sacrifices that duly belong to God and should be burned up on the altar. Not only that, they are sleeping with any number of the women who serve at the entrance of the tent of meeting, something that other nations were doing at the temples of their gods, but not the people of Israel. This second habit of Eli's sons has two caveats. First, Phinehas and Hophni, as leaders in this religious space, are using their power and authority to take advantage of these women who would have answered to them. Second, God had called the people of Israel to be a different kind of people, a people that would be blessed by God and in turn bless the nations around them, not follow suit in their neighboring nations' religious rituals. Israel was to be holy, what might be better understood as set apart or different from all of the other nations, because the God that they claimed to be in covenant or relationship with was and is holy. I have grown up learning that holy means perfect, but I think that misses too much of the nuance of the special relationship that God has entered into with the Israelites. God's holiness is reflected in the Israelite community in the ways that God calls and the Israelites seek alternatives to the traditional ways that their neighboring nations do things. God's holiness then would be better reflected in the lives of Eli's sons if they chose to take responsibility as leaders of the community, working toward an

environment in which everyone could thrive and flourish, rather than using their religious power for their unchecked physical appetites.

God warns Eli about his sons. Eli takes note of their actions and warns them as God has warned him, but they will not listen, most likely because Eli has allowed them thus far to get away with whatever they have wanted. Why would they listen now? What does dad really know anyway? He doesn't know what God wants. Not to mention, Eli has shown his own incompetence or lack of empathy as priest and judge already in his response to Hannah earlier.

With that, we enter our story this morning about Samuel, God, and Eli at Shiloh. The boy Samuel has already shown himself to be a better listener than his counterparts, Eli's sons who have squandered their responsibilities as religious leaders. Samuel is growing physically and spiritually stronger as he serves under Eli at Shiloh. Because of Hannah's faithfulness to God in dedicating her son to God's work at the tent of meeting, God has blessed her as well with more children. Note the contrast between how the story presents those who are powerless, namely the younger boy and his mother as worthy of blessing and honor and insight, and those who are powerful, namely the priestly father and sons who are destined for destruction and death.

The story in chapter 3 begins with both blindness and deafness. Eli has grown old and lost most of his eyesight. We already know from the stories leading up to this one that Eli has also become deaf to the warnings of God on his ministry and the ministry of his sons. In order to highlight how blind and deaf Eli has become, God speaks to Samuel. Now, both Samuel and Eli are in the same tent, albeit a large tent that houses the ark of the covenant and other sacred objects, but Eli does not hear God speaking. Is not Eli the priest and judge of the Lord? Is he not someone with a special relationship to God, one who oversees the sacrifices and prays on behalf of the people? Eli has lost his connection to God.

But Samuel hears it, a voice early in the morning before the lamp of God has gone out. “Samuel, Samuel.” The young boy runs to Eli, thinking that he has called him to help with something. If Eli’s eyesight is that poor, then Samuel probably has helped him get around throughout the day, so it would not be uncommon for Eli to call out for Samuel. But Eli has not done so. Eli tells Samuel to go back to bed. But again, Samuel hears someone calling for him. “Samuel, Samuel.” So he heads again to his master’s side, wondering what is going on, but Eli did not call him this time either. Eli tells him to go back to bed. It takes three times for Eli to finally realize. God has broken through to both Samuel and Eli in this moment. The roar of the call of God has overcome the spiritual deafness that has been ringing in Eli’s heart. Eli finally listens to Samuel and realizes what is happening. God is calling the young man. I wonder in this moment what is running through Eli’s head. Is this the moment when Eli finally realizes that it’s over, his rights as priest and judge; his special status with God. Maybe it has finally sunk in for him. God has moved on from his family to this young punk, who claims that he is hearing someone calling for him in the middle of the night. Eli tells Samuel to go back to bed, and if he hears someone calling for him again, he should respond, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” So Samuel does just that, and God appears to him in bodily form.

Now, I don’t know about you, but I’m getting really excited in this moment. In verse 10, it says that God came and stood there in the tent of meeting with Samuel. Can you imagine? God calls to him a fourth time and Samuel tells God that he is listening. God then gives Samuel a message for Eli, a message of impending doom. What a burden for a young person to bear, especially when it concerns the person who has raised him. God is calling Samuel not only as the priest that he is becoming but also as a prophet for his people. In some sense, Samuel is going to

tell his foster father that God is finished with him. God has warned Eli, and Eli has not listened, nor have his sons, so God is going to replace Eli and his family with Samuel.

Again, as the barren woman suddenly became the prophet earlier in the story in place of the corrupted religious leaders, a young man becomes both priest and prophet right under the nose of the older, more powerful priest whose ancestral line has historical claims to these religious duties at Shiloh. What a great reversal. The servant has become the master. The lowly have been lifted up and the proud have been brought low. The downtrodden have become the power holders. The young have been given the mantle of the elders. The gender norms have been overturned. Are you listening now? The traditional order of things has been turned on its head. God will not allow the injustice, greed, corruption, and deception to continue. God will not allow the apathy and complacency to continue as his people are led astray by religious leaders who care more for their own stomachs than the lives of their people. Are you listening now? Does this sound familiar in our current political climate?

Word of Samuel's call and his messages from God spread throughout the land of Israel. Everyone hears about the priest and prophet Samuel, unlike his predecessors. God continues to speak to Samuel at Shiloh. Remember at the beginning of chapter 3 how the word of the Lord was rare in those days. All of that has changed now that someone is listening and listening well.

So, how do we respond to such a story? What can we learn from the vanquishing of the line of Eli and the rise of the great prophet Samuel? Who might you be in the story? Who do you connect with most in the story? Who do you despise most in the story? If I become Eli and think through his blindness and deafness, I ask myself if I'm really listening to everyone that speaks to me. Are there instances, in which I have had to hear something three times or more for it to finally stick? Are there prejudices that I bring to conversations that give me the liberty to not

listen for any number of reasons? That person doesn't know what he or she is talking about. She doesn't read the bible correctly. He is too young to know anything about that. She has not lived here long enough to know what is really going on. He didn't grow up here, so how would he know? She's too naïve. He's mixed up, too emotional, or stubborn. She's past her time, too disconnected from what life is like today and too set in her ways to see what's really going on. How many different ways can we write off what other people say to us, not realizing that we might be writing off exactly what we need to hear.

If I'm Samuel, am I hearing God speak, but not knowing who is speaking to me or maybe who I could talk to about it? Or maybe I've heard God speak something truthful, but it hurts too much to say what needs to be said. What was Samuel feeling when God told him that his mentor and friend was going to be cast out of his position and cut off from the people of God? Samuel had to have been terrified to tell Eli what God had told him. What are you hearing God speak today, maybe directly or through others? How has God been calling you? Have you been listening well?

Let us pray, God of the oppressed and the downcast, give us the strength to listen and listen well. Help us to hear you as you speak directly to us, but also help us to hear you as your spirit speaks to us through our brothers and sisters in your new kingdom family. Give us the grace to get over ourselves and our pride, to really listen even when we think we are right, or we don't want to hear what particular people have to say. Transform us with your love. Give us discerning hearts and minds as we listen. Guide us on your way of peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.