

“Seeking the Sacred Unseen — Through Listening”

Series: *Seeking the Sacred Unseen*

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

Rev. Mayr Bowman

February 2, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

It is hard to imagine a good relationship that does not include listening.

Relationships thrive on the give-and-take of sharing and of caring, of talking and of listening.

Of course, there are times in all of our relationships when the balance of listening and talking is not equal . . . due to crises or to needs . . .

But mutual listening is like oxygen to a relationship.

Mutual listening sustains a relationship over the long haul.

This is true in human relationships.

And this is true in our relationship with God.

Listening is central to the deepening of a relationship.

And yet, for many of us, our relationship with God is dominated by our talking and by God’s listening. Talking with God can seem easy and listening can seem hard.

This morning, I would like to walk through some of the things that make listening to God hard.

To begin with, we have to take on the question of whether we think it is even possible for us to hear God. Is our God a God who speaks?

The best single source about God’s activities over time is the Bible.

And it is interesting to note that the Bible is unequivocal about God being a God of words and of communication.

God speaks creation into being.

The Holy Spirit inspires the written word of God.

And Jesus comes as the Word made flesh . . . a Word that came to live among us . . . both talking and listening.

According to the Bible, our God is a God of the spoken word, the written word, and the incarnate word.

But this understanding may beg another question.

Do we believe that the Creator of the Universe is truly interested in talking to each of us individually and intimately?

Yes, God spoke to people in the Bible, but is God really interested in speaking with us, with me?

The answer to this question is largely impacted by the images that we hold of God and the images that we hold of ourselves.

For example . . .

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If we think of God as being far off, of being distant, or of being busy with other things, then we might reach the conclusion that God does not in fact have an interest in speaking to us or being in intimate relationship with us.

If our image of God is of a vengeful judge who is sin-obsessed and disappointed in humanity, we might think that the only conversation God wants to have is about what we are doing wrong.

Similarly . . .

If our image of ourselves carries a sense of unworthiness before God, then we might not believe that we are worthy of hearing from God.

If our image of ourselves is that deep down, we are unlovable then we might not be open to a God who seeks to come to us in love.

Our image of God and of ourselves shapes our relationship and the way we communicate.

In our Scripture reading this morning, we listen as a patient God teaches Samuel how to hear God’s voice.

God tenderly calls Samuel by name — even using a divine endearment of repeating Samuel’s name.

Does God get angry that Samuel doesn’t answer God the first time? How about the second time? How about the third time?

We watch as God graciously waits for Samuel to understand God’s desire to speak with Samuel, to be in relationship with Samuel.

God has this same patience with us as we learn to listen.

We might say that Samuel was spiritually hard of hearing.¹

Like those who need help when they are physically hard of hearing, Samuel needed some help.

Samuel needed a hearing aid.

In the reading, we see that Samuel needed help from the priest Eli to learn how to listen.

Most of us need spiritual hearing aids when it comes to listening to God..

One of the most important hearing aids we may need is the belief and trust that God is for us.

Can we believe that God is for us regardless of the circumstances around us.

Julian of Norwich, a 14th century mystic, told of a time that God showed her a small thing. She asked what it was and was told that “it is all that is made.” As she studied this small thing that represented all that is made, she came to understand that three things are true. God made it. God loves it. God looks after it. And that this is true for all that is made.

Can we believe that we are made by God, loved by God and looked after by God?

And that this is the God who wants to be in relationship with us?

¹ Sue Pickering, *Spiritual Direction*, 53.

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Another hearing aid that may be helpful is to develop a practice of listening prayer. Lectio Divina is a listening prayer and there are other listening prayers and spiritual practice that are designed to help us listen to God.

Finally, we can learn from those who have had success in cultivating a listening relationship with God. Samuel went to Eli. We can go to people we know or learn from authors across time.

One of my favorite books about listening to God is Dallas Willard's *Hearing God*. In his book, Willard debunks the idea that in order to hear God, we have to hear a distinct voice or see a vision. Willard explains that God is most likely to speak to us through our own thoughts and feelings, through our observations of the world, through creation and through other people. Some of us have heard a voice at sometime in our lives, while others of us never will. But all of us have the ability to speak with God and listen for God in all that is around us and within us. God can come to us in a variety of ways. Everything in the world is an opening to God and an opening for God. A God who made us and loves us and looks after us.

When Samuel says “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening” . . . the Hebrew could also be translated to say. “Speak Lord, I am all ears. I am all yours.”

May God grant us the trust we need to listen.
May God open us to the various avenues that God might use to speak to us.
May God help us to say and to truly mean: “We are all ears. We are all yours.”
Amen.