
Lessons on Listening

1 Samuel 3:1-10

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 18, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

I know all of you have heard the big news this week—that the Duke Men’s basketball team lost to the University of Miami. I also heard this week the silent cry for Martin Luther King Jr.’s “dream” to come true because it has not yet been realized. We have not seen “the jangling discords of our nation” transformed “into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood [and sisterhood].” We have not yet seen “all of God’s children” joining hands and singing, “Free at last. Free at last.” We still find ourselves living in a valley of despair and climbing up the rough side of the mountain. His dream may be the first thing we think of when we think of Dr. King. How can you forget his unforgettable speech delivered before the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963 for the March on Washington, D.C. for Civil Rights?

He was a gifted orator rooted in the black church tradition. But he was so much more than an effective communicator. His speech and service had deep roots in silence. He was indeed a “drum major for justice.” But what many tend to overlook is the spiritual foundation for that particular drumbeat. Dr. King organized. He marched, preached, and he prayed. It is the latter that is not usually discussed when we talk about the legacy of Dr. King. But Dr. King reveals what the prophet Samuel affirms: prayerful listening leads to prophetic proclaiming. Silence and service are intertwined. One must listen before one speaks. The roots of social and civic engagement are listening skills. But what are you listening for? And to whom are you listening?

Listening anticipates a sound and what we hear is hopefully not only our own voice. *The first lesson on listening is that God speaks.* God speaks and calls Samuel four times, “Samuel! Samuel!” (vv. 4, 6, 8, 10), but three of those times, Samuel thinks it is the elder priest, Eli, who is calling him, suggesting how difficult it may be to discern the voice of God. If we don’t know God’s voice, we may run to the wrong people for advice and guidance, sometimes even making them god of our lives. If we don’t know the voice of God, we may only hear our own voice and then confuse our voice with God’s. Or, maybe we can’t hear God because of all of the noise, “the jangling echoes of [the] turbulence” (Howard Thurman) in the world or in our lives. Or, maybe we just listen to the distorted voices that tell us that it isn’t worth it, we can’t do it, it’ll never change. Voices of defeat that have nothing to do with serving a resurrected God but only a god who remains in a grave. Voices of hate that drown out the truth that the very nature of God is love. It maybe difficult to discern God’s voice sometimes but God is patient, continuing to call us when we don’t answer and when we even might be afraid what God may ask us to do.

It is not until the fourth time, after Eli tells Samuel that it is God calling, that Samuel responds to God’s call with “Speak, for your servant is listening” (v.10). At first, Samuel doesn’t know God’s voice, but he soon realizes that God is the foundation of his future prophetic work. God speaks, but do we listen? We have nothing to say if God doesn’t speak. God is calling, wanting to give us our voice, our vocation. “If God speaks,” according to Frederick Buechner, “He speaks not just through the sounds we hear... but through events in all their complexity and variety, through the harmonies and disharmonies and counterpoint of all that happens.”

God’s voice was heard in January 1956 amid the disequilibrium during the Montgomery bus boycott. It was a critical moment for Dr. King. He received a threatening phone call late at night. He said:

“I hung up but I could not sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point. I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. ‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid.

The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.'

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.

Three nights later, our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust. I knew now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life." The outer life of prophetic witness found its strength in the inward sanctuary.

God speaks at a kitchen table, in a living room, a bedroom, a dorm room, on a bus from East campus, in a class, here in chapel, whenever you're tired, weak and worn. God's voice is pervasive and God speaks, revealing the theological roots of sociopolitical activity or courageous mission in the world because if God doesn't speak, we have nothing to say. If God doesn't speak, we have nothing to do. If God doesn't tell you to do it, don't do it.

There was an old TV commercial about E.F. Hutton, the American stock brokerage firm, that said, "When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen!" When God speaks to you, you ought to be listening. Samuel eventually gets the picture and responds, "Speak, your servant is listening." *The second lesson on listening is that listening is actually the first task of a prophet.* The term 'prophet' is thrown around in society and in the church and usually we think of speaking right away. But what we learn from this call story today is the priority of listening in the work of a prophet, thus, we might want to reflect on the importance of listening skills in the life of faith. In other words, our pray may become, "Silence in me any voice but your own, that, hearing, I may also obey your will, through Jesus Christ my Savior." Silence is underrated but there is a time for everything under heaven, including a time to listen and keep silence (Eccles 3). If we won't listen, we won't discover who we are called to be and what we are called to do and say.

In his book, *Never to Leave Us Alone*, Vanderbilt historian Lewis Baldwin does a study of the prayer life of Dr. King and in it he argues that prayer was the "secret [nonviolent] weapon" of the civil rights movement. Dr. King took "days of silence" and throughout the movement, there were "calls to prayer," "prayer meetings," "prayer pilgrimages," "prayer vigils," "prayer rallies," "prayer marches," "prayer circles," "services of prayer and thanksgiving." Prayers in church seats and on the streets. Dr. King didn't delegate prayer as a second-class citizen in the struggle for justice and equality. It was just as vital to the success of the movement as picket lines, sit-ins, freedom rides, and marches. Prayer, as you know, involves speaking to God, but it is also a vital way we listen to God. "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

The legacy of Dr. King demonstrates the interrelationship of prayer and protest or action. Prophetic ministry was propelled by the posture of listening and his ministry suggests that prayerful listening was the lifeline for his work. But many are uncomfortable with silence or listening. On August 29, 1952, David Tudor walked onto the stage of the Maverick Concert Hall, near Woodstock, New York. He sat down at the piano, and, for four and a half minutes, made no sound. He performed "4'33'," a conceptual work by musician John Cage. It's been called the "silent piece" but its purpose is to make people listen. Cage didn't believe there was such a thing as silence because one could hear other sounds during that piece—the wind, raindrops, people talking or walking out. Many didn't really care for this musical experiment, including his own mother who thought he went too far. Expectations were not met but it may also be the case that people just have a hard time centering down in silence because we may not like what we hear from our own voice or God's.

Silence may be a corrective to a word-centered spirituality that believes that the amount of words reveals how deep one's spirituality really is. Perhaps we need an ear-centered theology that recognizes listening as much as speaking even as we read throughout scripture such lines as, "Hear, O Israel" and "faith comes by hearing."

When we listen, we indicate our intellectual and spiritual humility. We show that we don't have all the answers and need God's guidance. Listening signifies receptivity toward God, receiving the voice of God that I might discover my own voice in the world, that I may discover what to speak, how to act because rushing to action can at times do more harm than good. Listening is a form of love—we listen to those whom we love, and if we aren't listening, we may not love like we think we do. If we aren't listening we may not even recognize the voice of the one whom loves us unto death. Listening is not passive; it is active attention and it may be exactly what you need when the going gets rough rather than getting caught up in the flurry and noise of the “deadly magic”(Thurman) of activity.

This does not mean one sits in a pew of passivity as a Christian and doesn't act. This got a missionary in deep trouble one day (and I've shared this before). There was a missionary who was walking in Africa when he heard the ominous noise of a lion behind him. “Oh Lord,” prayed the missionary, “Grant in Thy goodness that the lion walking behind me is a good Christian lion.” And then, in the silence that followed, the missionary heard the lion praying too: “Oh Lord, I thank Thee for the food which I am about to receive.”

You pray. You listen. But there comes a time when you have to act. There comes a time when you have to speak. Speech comes out of silence. God speaks. We listen. *But the third lesson on listening is that listening leads to speaking.* You can't be silent forever. God will call you to speak and what we may be called to say may not be easy to digest. We may not want to speak it. Others may not want to hear it. But God still calls us to say it. This is why Dr. King, in a speech about Vietnam in 1967 at New York City's Riverside Church, says there comes a time to “break the silence” and “that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak,” he says. We must speak because God has spoken.

What Samuel is called to do is not easy. He's called to speak during a time of change, turmoil and impending war (1 Sam 3:11-20-4:1). Samuel cannot lie down (vv.3, 5, 6, 9) forever in the temple but must get up and act upon what he has heard and what he will say God says will make “the ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.” As a servant, an agent, of God in the world one follows the agenda of God. As a public “servant” one does not just serve society but God. In the case of Samuel, prophetic action is grounded in God's voice and direction, not even in the wisdom of the veteran priest Eli. Thus, to act justly in the world is to follow God's ongoing activity in the world. But to know what God is doing, one has to listen prayerfully. The legacy of Dr. King and others reveal that one may discover that civil disobedience and prophetic proclamation is rooted in theological obedience, prayerful listening to the call of a God of justice who says, “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

But to be able to speak, one must pray like the Harlem Renaissance poet, “pin [my] ear to the wisdom post”(James Weldon Johnson) that my mouth may be touched by the burning coals of God in order to speak what God desires me to speak. And what comes out of your mouth, may even be surprising to you because a prophetic word is a word that comes from One outside of you but when it enters your heart it is like fire shut up in your bones and then you can't help but speak.

Speak and declare that “There comes a time when silence is betrayal.” Speak and declare, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” Speak and declare, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” Speak and declare, “we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society.” Speak and declare, “On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.” Speak because “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Speak because someone has to declare, “Hate cannot drive out hate. only love can do that.”

And I have to speak, using the words of Andrae Crouch, after this week.

*I thank God for the mountains,
and I thank Him for the valleys,
I thank Him for the storms He brought me through.
For if I'd never had a problem,
I wouldn't know God could solve them,
I'd never know what faith in God could do*

*Through it all,
through it all,
I've learned to trust in Jesus,
I've learned to trust in God.
Through it all,
through it all,
I've learned to depend upon His Word.*

And the word God speaks was made flesh and dwells among us today in the sacrament of communion because God speaks incarnate words. So as you come to the table, let your ears see and let your eyes hear the revealed Word of God for you today and let your prayer be—"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."