

Text: 1 Samuel 3: 1-20

“Does a voice still speak?”

A couple of months ago Bob G (Rev Geddes) asked me what I thought to preach on my last couple of Sundays. Would I summarize the gist of what I have been preaching for the last 2 years? How would I summarize, anyway? I thought: first I will check out the lectionary, anyway. When I saw what the text for this week, 1 Samuel 3, I laughed, for a few reasons. It happens to be the text I was assigned to work on back in 1984, my first preaching class in seminary. I have in my files a marked and graded exegesis paper which looks at the political and historical setting, the literary history of the text, the Deuteronomic theology of it. I also have a graded sermon on this text. It is interesting to read, but I realize that I have changed. A sermon arises out of what a preacher “sees” in a passage. I see different things now than I did 30 years ago. That is as it should be. I could preach to you the sermon that I wrote back in 1984; It’s a fine sermon. But what is really interesting is what I didn’t see back then, and it makes me laugh. What I didn’t see is how this story is about learning to listen. And that is exactly how I would summarize my work at MacNab these last 2 years. That is exactly how I described to Presbytery, in October meeting, what we have been doing at MacNab for 2 years: learning to listen. So, as so often is the case, the lectionary gives us just what we need, when we need it.

Another thing that I didn’t see back then is the significance of the timing of Samuel’s learning to listen. The world that Samuel and Eli have known, that their grandparents, and great grandparents have known, is coming to an end: something called the “tribal confederacy” or “time of the Judges.” For 200 years, Israel was not what we would call a “nation” but rather a loose band of tribes, each doing their own thing unless they were threatened. When the Philistines got pushy, they would gather together, under a leader like Gideon, or Deborah, who would lead them into battle, and then they would go back to their land. It worked. But that is changing.

The Philistines are getting stronger. They are more disciplined, and interested in conquest. But even more crucial: They have a new technology: they have discovered how to make use of iron, which is much stronger than bronze. For 2000 years, the metal the world used was bronze: a mixture of copper and tin. It required a melting point of 1100. Iron requires a temperature of 1550. The Philistines had figured out how to get that temperature, and they were the ironsmiths, a monopoly they held onto closely.

That difference of 450 degrees determined “who would dominate and who would be relegated to the fringes of world events. Iron revolutionized . . . how much land they could plow, how much stone they could shape, how much wood they could cut. And it changed warfare to the same degree gunpowder did centuries later.”¹

Technology, back then as now, drives change. We know that, don’t we? I know that many of you feel left in the dust with email, texting, ipods, twitter feeds, androids. I even feel left in the dust! I have to ask my kids how to do things on facebook, and what is Google

1 www.followtherabbi.com “The Latest Technology”

Chrome, how to download music, and how to get movies off the internet. Anyway, all to say that maybe this story about Samuel is sort of like it is for us today: a changing world, and we feel a bit lost.

The change around us is not only technology, though. It is also a whole change of culture. Whereas at one point most of the people living downtown here were Scottish immigrants, who all wanted to go to a Presbyterian church, and church was simply WHAT YOU DID if you were a good Scot, we all know that it is nothing like that at all anymore. And all the bequest money in the world does not actually make us a church, does not make us relevant, does not make us alive. But I digress.

The world around Samuel is changing. The old no longer works. We know what that is like. It can be very scary. We can't see the future. We can't see our way forward. ***God speaks into that scary situation***, but not to the one who is supposed to hear. NOT to Eli, the trained priest; rather to the child, who doesn't really know how to recognize the voice, but is willing to learn, and ready to follow.

This story is sort of like a comedy of errors. We, the listeners watch it, waiting to see when, or how Samuel will figure out what is going on. God speaks; Samuel runs to Eli. God speaks again; Samuel runs to Eli. God speaks again (God is very patient, you notice). Eli finally figures out, and TEACHES SAMUEL how to respond. Interesting: we need to be taught how to recognize the voice of God. That knowledge needs to get passed down, from generation to generation. The ability to recognize the voice of God is not totally obvious and intuitive. It needs to be taught.

I can point exactly to the moment when I began to learn how to recognize the voice of God. I had grown up in the church; gone to Sunday school, done countless bible studies, knew this story of Samuel well, but no one had ever taught me how to recognize the voice of God. No one taught that prayer is about listening. But the church has, enfolded and sometimes hidden in its history, a very very old tradition for how to listen to God (called *Lectio Divina*). John Calvin practised it, but most present-day Presbyterians know little about it, let alone practise it. Back in 1999 (well into adulthood!) I was introduced to the church's oldest, most traditional way to listen for the voice of God: Reading Scripture to hear the voice of God speaking into our situation now, not just to people back then, but to me, and us, now. That is what this story is about: God has a very specific message for Samuel and Eli, for their particular time and place. *God has a very specific message that can only really be given to the people of Israel through a person who is willing to listen, and then stand firm, and say difficult things, and be faithful*, which is what Samuel begins to do. He does not only learn how to recognize the voice, but he also has the courage to speak it.

We are not surprised, I suspect, when we hear that Samuel is afraid to repeat God's message to Eli. It is a very difficult message. There is some risk for Samuel. He is totally dependent upon Eli for everything: for food, for safety, for his well-being. Eli has custody, and if he decides to make life difficult for Samuel, he can. But Samuel is courageous, and Eli is honest. And so the story continues: Samuel becomes a trustworthy voice for his people, because he listens, and he speaks what he hears. Samuel lives out a ministry, speaking the word of God to a people undergoing a huge change. During Samuel's lifetime, they move from the tribal confederacy to a nation with a king (Samuel is called to anoint the first king, Saul). So we see how back then, just as now, God does not desert God's people.

God does not do some magic to make the Philistines un-learn their technology so the world can stay safe and comfortable for the Israelites; rather God speaks to the people, and gives them messages so they can learn how to adjust to the new reality, and be faithful in it.

Are you hearing some parallels for us? God is not going to wave a magic wand and turn back the clock of technology so that we can be more comfortable. Neither is God going to wave a magic wand and turn back the trends of immigration that make 4 Presbyterian churches in the downtown core of Hamilton rather redundant. Neither is God going to wave a magic wand and make all those people living in downtown somehow, instantly, receptive and interested in Reformed worship. NO, rather *God is going to speak to us, and we will learn to listen, and we will learn to respond with wisdom and courage to a voice we will learn to recognize as true and faithful and life-giving.*

We, as a church, are going to become like Samuel. We are going to learn to say “Speak, Lord, for your servant listens.”

That is one way to describe what we have been doing these last 2 years. That is the story I told to Presbytery: that we have been learning to listen, to one another and for God. There are surely many stories to be told about these last few years. I know that some of you really don't understand or appreciate this way of telling the story of MacNab, and maybe even don't like it. Maybe even quite detest it! It sounds too passive, maybe. It sounds too wimpy. Maybe it sounds like we just sit around , staring off into space, doing nothing. But here is the stickler: when we actually hear the voice that assures us as being from God, it gives us courage. You notice the courage that Samuel had? It wasn't just because he was a precocious little guy. It was because he knew it was God speaking. And THAT makes all the difference. When it is God speaking, it transforms us, because that is what we are made for, and we know it.

The question is: if the God of Samuel is still speaking, and maybe even to us, and maybe even with a pretty *specific message for this time and place, which was different from Samuel's time and place; if that message can only really be given to the people of Hamilton through people who are willing to listen, people willing to stand firm, and say difficult things, and be faithful. Do we want to be that people?*

I believe I hear a voice.....MacNab! MacNab!!!

Maybe we will respond: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church, Hamilton Ontario
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