



## Surprise, Surprise!

1 Samuel 3:1-18

From time to time on a Sunday morning, I ask my congregation to participate

in the sermon. They usually get a little nervous, but for the most part are willing to play along. On one occasion I asked them to answer the following questions:

1. Can you take a picture of someone in California with an artificial leg?
2. What was the President's name in 1975?

Answer to question #1: You need a camera to take a picture in California; an artificial leg cannot normally take a picture. Answer to question #2: Donald J. Trump; his name has not changed since 1975.

As you can tell, I have a long-suffering congregation. Yet for all my silliness, these questions remind us of the importance of listening, not rushing to provide an answer before fully understanding what is being asked.

The Old Testament book of 1 Samuel takes place in a particularly dark period for the people of Israel, years marked by civil strife, national upheaval, and international concerns. Israel's leadership at the time, known as "the judges," functioned as military leaders in times of crisis and also as local rulers who administered political and legal justice (Judges 4:4-5). The time of the judges was a period of lawlessness and chaos in Israel when "everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 21:25).

By the time we come to 1 Samuel, 200 years have passed since the days of Moses. The relatively young nation of Israel is emerging from the indigenous local leadership of a loose confederation of clans, and they are asking for a king to provide national stability, a structured government, a developing economy, and an opportunity for trade, as well as a booming import and export business. The Israelites see the developing nations around them and want what they have. In their eyes, success would begin with a king.

## "In those days the word of the LORD was rare"

The opening chapters of 1 Samuel focus on Hannah and on the sons of Eli the priest, who, sadly, treated God with utter contempt. Chapter 2 closes on a disappointing note.

Chapter 3, however, introduces some optimism by focusing on young Samuel, who "continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men." Samuel has been working alongside Eli the priest. It is difficult to know exactly Samuel's age, but in my mind he is probably about 9 or 10.

*"In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out" (3:1-3).*

Eli has settled down for the night, believing the day over, with no idea that things are about to change. There was no warning earlier in the day, and Eli has not anticipated that God is about to intervene in the life of Samuel, paradoxically in an almost routine manner.

*"Then the LORD called Samuel" (3:4).* Please understand the significance of what is taking place. In the darkness God speaks in a quiet, unseen fashion. He reaches out to a tender, responsive heart and calls a wee boy. He does not speak to the national or the natural leaders. He speaks to the seemingly insignificant, the instantly forgettable. He speaks in the hidden moments, when no one is looking and the word of God is rare.

Samuel responds naturally; he runs to Eli and says, *"Here I am; you called me."* Eli replies, *"I did not call; go back and lie down."* This happens a second time. But when it happens a third time, Eli realizes that God was at work and tells Samuel that if he hears the voice again, he should say, *"Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."*

## "The LORD called Samuel a third time"

Please remember that interacting with God on a personal basis was a new experience for Samuel. Each day Samuel is surrounded by things associated with God—festivities and feasts, daily prayers and sacrifices, incense and ritual. Outward observance and religious duty

were always on display in the tabernacle where Samuel was helping Eli.

But now Samuel comes face to face, not with the external trappings of religion, not with a pattern of religious observance or ritual, but with God Himself. Samuel would come to realize that there is a world of a difference between them.

From time to time we read in Scripture that God speaks to us through familiar voices. He often provides guidance for us in quite ordinary ways. Sometimes it is through misgivings about a relationship. On other occasions it is a compulsion to apply for a job or a response to challenging circumstances. Sometimes we find spiritual wisdom through the counsel of a family member or a close friend. God uses those good and bad experiences to refine and shape and call us to be more Christ-like in our daily lives.

The morning after God's call, Eli asks Samuel to tell him exactly what God said. Samuel faithfully reports that the judgment of God will fall upon the house of Eli. In full surrender, Eli responds by saying, *"He is the LORD; let Him do what is good in His eyes" (3:18).* What a wonderful verse to hold onto. When I am seeking the guidance of God over an issue, I come back to this verse and read again, *"He is the LORD; let Him do what is good in His eyes."*

Over the years, Samuel would come to experience God in moments of great tenderness and intimacy. He would learn the supreme joy of grappling with the majesty, grace, grandeur, greatness, magnificence, and splendor of the incomparable love of God.

Samuel would come to understand what it means to lose himself in the presence of God—to be refreshed and renewed in the concentrated brilliance of His glory, relishing His redemption, worshiping in the wonder of His grace, overwhelmed by His transcendent holiness. Samuel would come to understand that when God reveals Himself through His Word, no other experience even comes close.

And that is precisely why we need to listen very carefully.