

Having an Ear for God's Voice
I Samuel 3:1-10
September 1, 2019

These are days of miracle and wonder, this is the long distance call, sings Paul Simon on the Graceland album. These days my son can call me from Japan and it can seem as close as next door. We can communicate with Mars and the solar system, with the invisible world of the tiniest pieces of God's creation under our microscopes and through computer technology do all sorts of marvelous communication that would amaze our ancestors.

In the late 60's I had a part time job at IBM in Toronto. Every morning on my way to the selectric typewriter division I passed a glassed in room that housed large computers. The computers were contained in large units over six feet high and two feet wide. This represented the latest computer technology available. Today the power in my phone is many times faster and more sophisticated than that entire room of computers. Yes, we have entered the world of miracle and wonder!

In the movie **Contact** Jody Foster sits for days and weeks and months at her monitor yearning to hear sounds from deep space, which will confirm that life does exist out there. Of course the irony is that when she does in fact make contact the scientific community will not believe her because she doesn't have hard evidence.

Can we hear God's voice amid all this miracle and wonder?

Israel waits for something to happen. All looks bleak and without promise. Oh, yes they did have that ancient promise from their ancestors that God would give them this land and make them a blessing. But here they are under the power of the Philistines and others. They are a group of tribes scattered over modern Palestine, without political power or unity, and no charismatic leader. And to add misery to this woe, they have a corrupt priesthood who are skimming off the top of the offering. Eli's sons are morally bankrupt and Eli himself powerless to do anything about it. Because of this our story tells us, "the word of the Lord was rare in those days and

visions were not widespread.”

Can you see parallels today? We live in a society drowning in communication and yet the weighty words of God are rare indeed. Even in our dying Christendom, our mainline Protestant glory days far behind us, we often struggle to hear God’s word amid all the white noise that surrounds us today.

On reflection it would seem that amid the decline of our religious establishment over the past fifty years we have sought ways to stay alive. For we realized that since the 60's society had tuned into different channel from our religious language and music. So many of us within mainline Protestantism decided the best way to be heard again was to bring ourselves in line with modern thinking on life. So on a number of social issues we allowed the voices in society to drown out the word that had shaped us and given us our identity as God’s people. And for many churches this had the effect of leaving our people with the bones of a social gospel that has little theological depth or life to transform lives.

But decline wasn’t averted! Even within our presbytery we seem to have had neither the will nor the vision to close the chapters of many of our churches that had long since lost the battle with relevance and life. I think of my home Kirk in Scotland where every year I visit yet another church has become an art gallery or restaurant. Here in Canada the decline has been precipitous with the mainline denominations: Anglican, United, Lutheran and Presbyterian. What will change this pattern? Who do we wait for? What vision and word from God will awake this tired, old institution? Or is God about to do a new thing as he would do in Israel?

Today’s society in the West, especially those under 40, is tuned into different stations from those that the church has been operating on since the 50's. The fact that the mouse only understands mouse language in **Alice in Wonderland** never occurred to Alice. Sometimes when I attend Presbytery meetings and listen to the archaic language we invoke to certify candidates for ministry, or ordain people, I wonder to myself if we realize how totally foreign it all sounds to modern folk. It would be just like Alice trying to communicate with a mouse in English.

As long as churches remain in our own pool, swimming happily around speaking to one another in our private language, there will be no exit to the shores of the real world outside. Who are these mouse creatures who live on the distant shores? What are their longings, tears, hopes, fears, dreams, likes and dislikes? In order for the church to find out what the language of the mouse stands for we must get out of the pool and travel to shore and listen. This used to be called evangelism, or spreading the good news. It's a sad indictment on the mainline church that it is embarrassed by such language.

The change in Israel began with a humble woman called Hannah. This is woman of faith and prayer. It is in response to her that God acts. I know we think of Samuel as the hero in this story, and so he is, but behind in the shadows stands a mother of faith whose prayer changed things.

Phyllis Tickle's book, ***The Great Emergence***, speaks of the critical hinge moments that moved the church forward. In 600 AD it was the establishment of the Benedictine monastery system that rescued the church from extinction and preserved it through the dark ages. In 1054 AD it was the great Schism, the separation of the Greek and Roman church that ushered in a new age for the church. In 1517 Luther sparked a massive reformation of the church. Today we stand on the cusp of another transformation. What form exactly that will take is yet to unfold. But change she is a coming! Through the prayers and the faith of individual Christians the church experienced transformation and life as the Spirit swept through its ancient forms.

Samuel heard his name being called in the wee hours of the morning. Like God did with Moses, God calls Samuel by name. "Samuel, Samuel," God whispers. How we would love to have this advantage. Something clear and distinct from God. But remember Samuel and Eli and Israel had no bible at this time. They had stories of their ancestors, of Abraham and Moses and the great exploits of the Judges, but no written word. God still communicated by prophets and charismatic leaders, like Samson, Moses, Miriam, and so on. But today, in these last days, says the writer to the Hebrews, God speaks with a different voice.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

This is God's communication with us today, through his written word, through the Spirit working through the word, both in the church and in the world. Are we listening? Are we tuned into the right channel? Is the church promoting bible study as essential to its life and not simply as a nice pious thing to have on the agenda, along with all our other church activities?

That is why so many churches engage in the Alpha program. This is basic bible study to reach inside the church and outside to folk seeking answers. How do you hear God's voice today? We need Hannah's quietly listening in prayer; we need Samuel's open to God's voice calling them into leadership and service; God needs the church to be dialed into the voice of Scripture again so as to be infused with life by the Spirit and transformed by grace.

One of the new things that God is doing I believe is drawing a tighter circle around who is church. Those who are finding their way back into church are seeking spirituality and meaning, not an establishment to call comfortable and pious. Moreover, ministry is no longer the sole responsibility of clergy. More and more we are going to see the baptized Christians, the people of God in the world, who will communicate the good news. They will be the ones who visit the far shore of Moses' land and learn their language and ways. We can no longer be church only in the stain-glassed seclusion of our sanctuary. The world will no longer come to us as they were once compelled to do by social/political correctness. God is doing a new thing, so let us join the movement of grace.

Amen