

Maggie Keeler

“Speak, Lord, Your Servant is Listening”

August 13, 2023

When Jessica McArdle asked me this spring if I would preach this summer, I’ll admit that I was reluctant “yes.” The idea of addressing the adults instead of the kids was (is) intimidating.

But I was also pretty intimidated when I did my first time for the young nearly two years ago. I wondered how I would get the kids’ attention? If it was possible to get a message across in just a few minutes?

I don’t claim to be a Time for the Young expert, but I do feel like I’ve learned a few things since that first Sunday.

- Props are good.
- Ask questions. Rhetorical ones are good but also give the kids a chance to talk.
- But don’t give them the microphone because you might need to edit their comments a little bit - like when they bring up how baby chicks are made on Easter morning. (Big eyes.)
- Share something personal.

So I have a prop and a question to get us started today. Headphones.

How often do you put on headphones or pop in airpods? Or just flip on a speaker? I probably do it several times a day. I might listen to a podcast

while I walk our dog. Or put on some music while I'm working to tune out the never ending parade of landscapers in our neighborhood.

When we put on headphones, we do it so that we can intentionally listen to something. And with all the streaming services it's not just something, it's the song or the podcast or the book of our choice. We choose what we tune into and what we tune out. So what are you listening to these days? Do any of you have a new favorite artist? A podcast that you just can't get enough of? We can compare lists after service.

But what I really want to know is - How often do you choose to tune into God? To listen to what He has to say?

Some folks argue that God no longer speaks outside of His Word. Period. Never. The Bible is the complete and sufficient Word of God that gives us everything we need. But I believe, and Will has assured me that our faith tradition supports, theologian A.W. Tozier's assertion that, "God is forever seeking to speak Himself out to His creation. The whole Bible supports this idea. God is speaking. Not God spoke, but God is speaking...It is the nature of God to speak." He speaks because he wants us to know him.

And if we want to know him then we need to listen to what he has to say. Think about it. If we don't listen to our friends then we can't get to know them. It's the same with God, we need to spend time listening to Him so that we can get to know Him better. Not only that, but we need to listen to him if we want to stay on the right track as our reading from Proverbs

tells us. It is His words that will help us to understand who He has created us to be.

So Yes, God uses the Scriptures. But He goes beyond the written word. He communicates with us through our dreams, through a thought or idea, through whispers in our hearts, through a song or a Bible verse that we remember at just the right moment, through the people around us.

The Bible is full of stories of people who heard directly from God.

- Elijah heard the whisper of God on the mountain.
- Moses heard God in a bush, then had very consistent communion with God.
- Joseph, Solomon, and Daniel received messages in dreams.
- And then there is today's story of Samuel.

I like the story of Samuel's call for so many reasons, but I think the thing I find most relatable is Samuel's reaction to God's call.

Samuel was serving Eli at the tabernacle. One night Samuel was lying in his bed and he heard a voice say "Samuel". Samuel jumped out of bed and went to Eli's room and said, "Here I am; you called me." Eli told him that he hadn't called him and sent Samuel back to bed. Samuel went back to bed. A second time a voice said, "Samuel". Again, Samuel went to see what Eli needed. Again, Eli sent him back to bed.

A third time Samuel heard someone say, "Samuel" and he went back to Eli's room and said, "Here I am; you called me." By this point, Eli realized that it was the Lord that was speaking to Samuel and told him to go back to his room and when he heard his name called again to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Samuel followed Eli's instructions and went back to bed. And when God called as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." God spoke to Samuel and told him many things that would happen soon.

When I hear this story, I can't help but wonder what Samuel knew about talking with God? The scripture tells us that "Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." So it's not surprising that the first or even second time he hears God's voice he doesn't recognize it. After all, how/when do we learn to talk WITH God? That prayer is a conversation, a dialog with God rather than a monologue. How do we learn to hear God's voice? Learning to hear God can take a bit of effort, some patience, a willingness to be present, and genuinely interested in what God has to say.

Fortunately as Beth Scibienski points out, Samuel had Eli there to introduce him to God. Isn't that what Eli is doing? He's introducing Samuel to the Lord. He's nurturing him into a relationship with the living, speaking, loving God. Samuel, meet God. God, well you know Samuel already. You two talk.

I have realized that I often rush through my prayers. Talking to God rather than talking with him. I list my perceived needs and pour out my worries. I pause for a moment of gratitude. I try to add some praise. I want to connect with God. But outside noise often fills up all the nooks and crannies of my prayers. I wonder how often God is trying to get a word in edgewise but his still small voice is drowned out by that noise?

Samuel offers us a beautiful, childlike picture of what "talking with God" can look like, when he said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." That's all. No elegant prayers. No elaborate introductions. Just a simple invitation to talk.

Father Thomas Keating says, "Silence is God's first language, everything else is a poor translation. In order to hear that language, we must learn to be still and to rest in God." This summer I have tried to incorporate Samuel's invitation into my own prayer time, to take time to tune into God's voice, to ask God if he wants to talk. "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

I've also tried to intentionally practice silence throughout the day, pausing briefly as I switch from one task to another to quiet my mind and turn to God. To listen for his voice in everything I do and everywhere I go as Proverbs advises.

Interestingly enough today's message and my very first Time for the Young have the same theme. "Listening for God" That Sunday when the children returned to the sanctuary for the first time after the pandemic, Will and I had discussed an entirely different theme but I kept thinking about a lesson on prayer that we had taught in Stepping Stones a few weeks before. I realized I left out a very important part of the lesson. That prayer isn't just talking TO God. Prayer is talking WITH God and felt this need to share the idea with the children. And as I started to think about what I wanted to talk about this Sunday, I kept coming back to the story of Samuel and coming across verses like Psalm 85:8 "I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises peace to his people." And then the Roots & Branches group asked the ministry team to read a book they are considering for the fall called "Let me ask you a Question: Conversations with Jesus."

A coincidence? Maybe? But I am beginning to think that God is trying to get my attention and that has something that he wants to say to me. So I'm trying to do a better job of listening. Speak Lord, your servant is listening.