

TO WHOM DO WE LISTEN?

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Text: 1 Samuel 8:4–10, 18–20

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. . . . “And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

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I knew something had to change when the following scene became all too common in my house: Hannah would approach me and begin to tell me something when she would realize quickly that she did not have my full attention. “Mom,” she would say emphatically, “are you listening?” Caught with my eyes on the computer screen or looking down at my phone I would retort, “Yes!” even though we both knew I was not. Sometimes she would quiz me: “Tell me what I said, then.” (I maintain about a 50 percent average in getting this correct.) Or she would throw her hands up and walk away in frustration, for which I would feel immediate guilt and remorse. Or I would close my computer, put down my phone, and look at her with intent and interest and ask her to start over . . . which would usually elicit an eye roll, and then she would acquiesce and generous listening would begin.

Today we begin a summer of preaching from the Hebrew Bible, known to most Christians as the Old Testament, sometimes referred to as the First Testament. Using the lectionary, a prescribed order of readings for each Sunday of the year, we will spend most of our time in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, rounding out August with a couple of weeks in 1 Kings. Rather than adhere to a particular theme, DeWayne, Seth, and I will let the scriptures themselves shape our messages as we travel through a transitional time in the history of the Israelites, as God’s people continue to grapple with living in community, freed from the bonds of slavery, yet unsure of what kind of governance would best serve them. We enter the story today at a pivotal point in the progression of authority – Samuel is the people’s prophet, guiding them through a time when judges were chosen and appointed by God to rescue the people from their enemies and establish justice. The prophet Samuel is old and has just commissioned his sons (who are, unfortunately, corrupt and disliked) to be judges. The people come to Samuel, demanding a monarchy, insisting that in order to compete with other nations

they must have a king. Dejected and disappointed, Samuel turns to God, who insists that the people are not rejecting Samuel, they are rejecting God, refusing to live under God's rule, even though God is the one who liberated them over and over again. God instructs Samuel to tell the people all the consequences of living in a monarchy, and while these verses were not included in this morning's reading, they prophesy a contemporary reality, eerily reminiscent of our own present and past: drafts for war, land appropriation, taxation, livestock confiscation, and finally, permanent enslavement. God does not deny the onset of a monarchy, God tells Samuel to give the people what they want even as they continue to turn away from God's vision of kin-dom. And here we are, thousands of years later, living in the consequences of human governance.

In our ten verses of scripture from 1 Samuel this morning, the word "listen" is used three times. Even within the quagmire of the transition of authority, which is the story within this text, the call to listen is profound: God implores Samuel to listen to the voice of the people – what is it they are really asking for? And the people choose not to listen to Samuel's prophetic words that a monarchy would essentially destroy their community. This invites us to deeply consider two questions: Are we generous listeners? And to whom, ultimately, will we listen?

Listening is an everyday act—an art really—that many of us take for granted or downright neglect. My illustration with Hannah is not uncommon: It is too easy to multitask, to feign attention, to not be fully present in a conversation. A deeply meaningful component to my role as a pastor is to acutely listen to others tell their story—in the building of a relationship, during a time of grief and loss, while celebrating a life transition—these moments are transformative, and we all know when we have been heard . . . and when we have been ignored. Hannah's ability to name my failure of fully listening to her might be easier to achieve in familial relationships, when the largest consequence might be irritation before acknowledgement and forgiveness, yet it is a reminder of the necessity to be fully present to another, to stand witness to their story, no matter how distracted we might be or how eager we are to move on to whatever we deem is more important than that moment. Krista Tippett, host of the NPR show *On Being*, says, "Generous listening is powered by curiosity, a virtue we can invite and nurture in ourselves to render it instinctive. It involves a kind of vulnerability—a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. The listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other, and patiently summons one's own best self and one's own best words and questions."

Early in the pandemic I discovered a poem by Marilyn Nelson called "Generous Listening" and shared it in one of my recorded morning meditations. Karen Barstad, our church Moderator, reminded me of the poem a few weeks ago when she used it to open a meeting:

*A conversation can be a contest,
or a game of catch with invisible balloons.
They bounce between us, growing and shrinking,
sometimes floating like cloud medicine balls,
and sometimes bowling at us like round anvils.
You toss a phrase and understanding blooms
like an anemone of colored lights.
My mind fireworks with unasked questions.
Who is this miracle speaking to me?
And who is this miracle listening?
What amazingness are we creating?
Out of gray matter a star spark of thought
leaps between synapses into the air,
and pours through gray matter, into my heart:
how can I not listen generously?*

What might happen if we viewed whom we were listening to as a miracle and we made a commitment to listen more generously? I believe this practice might be like a balm for our wounded world, for our fractured relationships, for our pursuance of healing.

While God directs Samuel to listen to the people, God also understands that the people are not listening to God or to Samuel and have an agenda contrary to God's way as they seek to establish a different kind of governance. This sad realization will eventually have dismal results, so in addition to considering what kind of listener we might be, we are also challenged to contemplate whose voice and perspective we trust: To whom do we listen?

There are many voices vying for our allegiance, shouts and whispers, truth and fake news. We must be prudent as we determine whose voice holds authority for us. Just because one says it—no matter their status or power—that does not make it so. Throughout this pandemic we have been given false information, poor advice, differing scientific views, contradicting expert opinions. Sifting through what is real and what is not takes a kind of attention to which we are not accustomed, it requires a listening and deciphering and study that consumes important time. I will not tell you to whom you should listen, as you must discern this yourself, but I will advise that no longer should we heed only voices of dominant culture. We must stand back and generously listen to our siblings of color, we must witness their pain and take seriously their counsel. And as people of faith, we must also grow still and listen deeply for the voice of God in our midst, whether that is the small but persistent voice within or a beckoning from beyond, the constant nudging of our conscience that calls for courage and perseverance. Even though disappointed within our scripture lesson today, God is the One who loves without condition and always visions for us a world where justice reigns and peace is possible. Our scripture today reminds us that if we choose not to listen to this voice of the Divine, we are sure to wander in the wilderness, make poor choices and carve out a disastrous future. One scholar, commenting on our scripture text, shares, "In a rush to confront and move forward, whose voices and memories are left behind? How does a spontaneous wish for change from Israel's elders shed light on our own impulsive claims and hasty anger? How might our own circles and preferred talking points take shape out of an obliviousness to the full scope of God's redeeming grace?"¹

The time is now to listen generously, in order to create amazingness together. The time is now to determine whose voice holds authority in our lives and to choose those voices with tender wisdom, considering what is best for all over some. And the time is now to turn towards God, surrendering to the Divine voice in discerning the truth.

Amen.

¹Klaus-Peter Adam, Associate Professor of Old Testament, The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago