

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
Sunday, January 14, 2018 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Psalm 139
1 Samuel 3:1-11

Sermon: The Voice (Epiphany 2)

There's this myth of motherhood, or maybe it applies to parenting in general, that in a crowded room, full of adults talking and kids playing, if your baby cries or your toddler calls out for you, saying "Mummy!" that a good mother or parent will recognize their own child's voice.

That never worked for me. When my own children called out for me, or cried in a room full of babies, I confess that I was usually the last parent in the room to turn and see if it was my baby. On the other hand, when any other child calls out, even to this day, I still look to make sure it's not one of my children. Which is very unlikely, because they are teenagers now and they always pretend they don't know me in public spaces.

So I don't buy this myth of automatically recognizing the voice that is calling you – that somehow that recognition reveals a primal intimacy and connection like no other. I sympathize with Samuel and Eli, their confusion in the temple, when God called Samuel – but neither one caught on to what was really happening. Samuel mistook the voice of God for Eli. Eli mistook God's voice for Samuel's sleepiness or dream.

Have you ever thought you heard someone call your name in a crowd; or turned around thinking you heard a voice, but no one was there? Have you ever felt that nudge of the Spirit, telling you to call someone? Have you ever stopped to listen to that deep inner voice, advising you to wait and reconsider before you press that "send" button on your email? Have you ever woken up from a dream wondering what it was trying to tell you?

What does it mean to hear the voice of God? What does it mean to listen and then to follow that voice?

Today we heard the story of Samuel, a significant character in the biblical history. Samuel arrived on the biblical stage when the tribal communities that made up the political structure of the ancient Middle East were changing. There was, at that time, little connection between human leadership and the voice of God. Rituals were steady, tradition was reverent. But only rarely did time in the temple provoke a truly divine encounter: We read in Samuel's story that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; and visions were not widespread."

The story of Samuel, the way we tell it, tends to emphasize that Samuel was the sole recipient of God's word. Samuel became a lone hero – the only one God talked to, the only one on whom the salvation or future of God's people rested.

And yet the Bible is clear: Samuel was surrounded by a community of faith. The boy Samuel, the prophet Samuel, was only possible because of the faith and work of others who were hungering for the word of God in that place. The story tells us that the word of God was rare, but the word for rare doesn't mean that God's word was unimportant. The Hebrew word

translated as “rare” in English is the same word that is translated as precious in other passages, when it is used for rare jewels.

We know that Eli’s sons, the priests in the temple, were corrupt, and that they exploited their religious status. But for the people around them, God’s word itself was precious, and the wider community around the temple was hungering for true hope and a meaningful vision.

So Samuel didn’t just appear out of nowhere. Samuel’s mother cultivated Samuel’s ability to hear God’s voice. Before his birth, Hannah is identified in the Bible story as a barren woman, a social outcast. But Hannah refused to believe that God had no purpose for her. She prayed to God that her life might be as productive and creative as she believed God intended it to be. She promised God that any child born of her womb would be dedicated to God’s work and mission. When Hannah finally became pregnant and bore Samuel, she raised him in the knowledge that God had given him a unique vocation to fulfil. And so his ears were opened to hear God’s voice.

Samuel’s father, Elkanah, also contributed to the development of Samuel’s ability to hear God. Elkanah had children through his other wife, Peninah, but he loved Hannah’s spirit and refused to divorce her, or to demote her in the household. When Peninah bullied Hannah, Elkanah stood up for her and took her to Shiloh for the festival of prayer. He had faith that her faith would be fulfilled.

Eli also played a role. The bible tells us Eli’s eyesight was dim, because he turned a blind eye to the corruption of his sons. And yet, Eli accepted young Samuel into his service. When Samuel came in the night, having heard a voice, it was Eli who finally figured out that God had come calling. And when Samuel would have hidden God’s “ear-tingling” condemnation from Eli, Eli chose to hear the unvarnished truth, no matter the personal cost.

All of them contributed to the call that Samuel heard in the temple that night: a call answering the hunger and longing of his people for the true word of God.

No prophet, priest, or leader ever arose in scripture without a community of other people who helped them find their way. As much as we like to focus on the story of Samuel as if he were a hero arising out of a religious vacuum in order to rescue the people of God, I also believe that this story has something to say about God’s voice, calling us as a community of faith.

Last fall our Council, our Stewards and our Session took some time in their meetings to discuss a questionnaire called “Evaluating our Situation.” Their responses had some remarkable consistency. One of the statements they responded to was this: “Our community would greatly miss our church if we disappeared...” There was very strong agreement that if RPUC were to close their doors, our neighbourhood would miss the variety of things we offer: the music, the worship, programming for kids, low cost rental space, Christmas Cheer, the bazaar and the lobster supper, drop-in counselling, refugee sponsorship, just to name a few. RPUC is a busy place, and it is not just Rideau Parkers who would miss our church if the building closed its doors.

That’s the easy part. The harder part of the discussion was around Rideau Park’s vision for our mission. It was generally agreed in all of these discussions that we do not have a clear vision or expression of WHY Rideau Park exists, or what ways we hope to grow in the future. In all of our discussions it was clear that the old mission statement has taken us a long way, but it is time for an update. It is time to see if it still fits.

Our mission statement can be seen on the website and the outside sign – on bulletins and annual reports. It sounds like this: *“Rideau Park United Church is a family of people who joyfully proclaim a loving God as revealed in Jesus Christ. As caring members of this Church we seek to do this by: Joining together in worship, prayer and music; reading and studying the Bible; living a Christian life; nurturing you and old in Christian education programs, seeking justice for everyone; and continually sharing our faith, hope, talents and resources with our community, country and the world.”*

It was formulated in 1992 – what were you doing in 1992? It has stood the test of time. But the world has changed a lot since 1992.

In 1992, Brian Mulroney was Prime Minister of Canada’s 10 provinces and 2 territories – Nunavut was not created yet. NAFTA was signed between Canada, the US and Mexico, and the European Union had just come into being. In fashion, high waisted pleated jeans were all the rage – unless you went for the stirrup pants, of course. Hair was poofier, and makeup was sparkly. The Toronto Blue Jays won the World Series and Roseanne was the top TV show.

1992 was also the year that Motorola marketed the first mobile phone – supposedly pocket-sized. Bill Gates predicted that everyone would be using electronic mail (later abbreviated to the name email) on desktop computers. Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, was only 12. And streaming services like Netflix or Crave, or even Rideau Park’s live webcasts, they were just a twinkle in somebody’s eye.

Since 1992, communication devices, information technology and social media have had a dramatic impact on every community, and on our faith community, too. Not to mention the impact of cultural and socio-economic changes in our neighbourhood. Changes in education and employment and leisure activities and cultural backgrounds have all impacted our faith community and the neighbourhood around us.

Our 1992 mission statement has stood up well to the impact of time and to many cultural changes. But we need to talk about the vision of Rideau Park: How are we supporting the voices of people like Hannah, who tell us that even the outcast knows that God has something important for her to do? How are we calling Eli and his sons to account for ignoring the hungry hearts they are supposed to serve? How are we helping to cultivate the faith and truth-telling of a prophet like Samuel for our own time and place? What is God calling us as Rideau Park to do? What is God calling us to change?

As we live into the year 2018, I hope we have more time to explore how you envision Rideau Park’s mission and how I envision it, and how we might envision our mission and ministry together. Because I believe that we are not just low or no cost rental space, we are not just music programming for children and youth, we are not just Christmas Cheer hampers. We are surrounded by a neighbourhood of people who are hungering for something rare and precious.

And if we listen for God’s call, we just might be able to bring that vision to life in the world around us. Thanks be to God, who calls us, and keeps calling us. May we have hearts and minds open to listen. Amen