

The Voice of God  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
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15:11

This morning's scripture is famous, I'm sure many of you have heard it before. Young Samuel, who eventually will become a famous prophet and anoint the first two kings of Israel—Saul and David, is in the Temple, lying down and minding his own business, staying right next to the Ark of God, the most sacred object in Israelite worship that marked the presence of God. And God calls out to him in this inner room of the Temple.

Samuel thinks it's Eli, the High Priest and his mentor, and runs to answer his call only to discover, with Eli's help, that in fact it is God calling out to him. It is God saying his name. His response? "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." [1]

This concept of God speaking to Samuel can be difficult to understand. We may immediately feel a little torn inside, it's a great story, but God was calling Samuel's name? Okay, sure. And God ends up in the next part of the chapter having a lengthy conversation about some events to come? Well that's just weird.

It brings up a great point in our modern society, as Lily Tomlin says, "Why is it when we talk to God, we're said to be praying, but when God talks to us, we're schizophrenic?" We intellectual mainline Protestants are leery of God speaking to people. It seems a little far-fetched probably and too out there. And "God speaking to someone" has too often been used as an excuse for bad behavior by Christians. God told me I should discriminate against this group or that group, God told me that these people are sinners and going to hell, etc. etc. God told me that Tim Tebow and the Broncos are going to beat the Patriots? Please.

When I once told a Southern Baptist classmate of mine in college that I felt God call me to the ministry, I didn't say that I heard God's voice, just that I had a religious experience and felt called by God to ordained ministry—her comment was that God would never call a woman to be a minister, it must have been the devil.

And to that I think how sad are we to believe that we can understand the mind of God completely, how God works, what God does or doesn't say, who God does or doesn't call. We so often can't leave any room for mystery. And we make God to be exactly who we want God to be. We make God act in our minds exactly how we want God to act.

As Anne Lamott once said, "You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image, when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." I would add that we can safely assume that we've created God in our image, when it turns out that God acts exactly as we want God to act. We've created God in our image when God says exactly what we want to hear from God. If God hates anyone we hate, what a terrible way to imagine God. Personally I'm with Martin Luther King Jr. when he said, "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear."

But it seems that people hate or fear what they don't understand. If we were just to take the time to sit down and understand people who are different than us, the world would be a better place. Some wonderful examples I read of this recently came from a fantastic book called *My Jesus Year: A Rabbi's Son Wanders the Bible Belt in Search of His Own Faith*, written by Benjamin Cohen. Cohen is the son of an Orthodox rabbi who hits a wall in his own faith and wonders what Christianity is all about. So he spends a year among Christians—visiting Christian churches, meeting Christian leaders all around the Atlanta area, where he's from.

Cohen's intention was never to convert to Christianity, and he doesn't. In fact, his Jesus Year ends up making him a better Jew, as he appreciates certain aspects of his faith that he never did before.

He worships in some mega churches and Evangelical churches. He attends a Christian Wrestling match and various Christian rock concerts. Cohen comments on his experience at one of the Evangelical churches and here's what he observes, "The lead singer in the band, a seventeen-year-old girl, introduces the next prayer. She says she chose this verse because it spoke to her. At synagogue if a verse starts speaking to someone, we kindly escort them to Dr. Steinberg, the resident synagogue psychologist." [2]

This is language foreign to Cohen, he wonders how to understand this phrase, something he would never hear uttered in his synagogue. The minister at the church preaches a sermon and interprets the story of Moses and God speaking to him from the burning bush. Cohen finds himself feeling ill at ease when the minister claims that this story points to God speaking to everyone, skewing the classical Jewish interpretation of the text.

Cohen says, "Although in Jewish tradition we can speak to God through prayer and supplication, we don't believe that God converses directly with mere mortals. Throughout biblical history, Moses was the only human to ever actually speak with God. (Talmudic sages explain that although God did talk with other prophets—Isaiah, Samuel, and Ezra, for example—it was not on the same 'friendly' level as with Moses.) The bottom line, we were taught, was if you think God is speaking to you, go clean out your ears." [3]

So here's this Christian minister saying that because God spoke to Moses, God can speak to all of us, that God talks to everyone. Here's Cohen, an Orthodox Jew, sitting there in the pew with his stomach in knots thinking that this preacher has completely misinterpreted a pivotal text from his beloved faith tradition. And here I am, reading this book and thinking that I can see both sides of this story and I don't know what to do.

When we look to the Hebrew Scriptures, we have to handle them with care. We can't just use our Christian lens and not care about what Jewish interpreters have to say about the text. On the other hand, the founders of our faith could have left these Hebrew Scriptures out of the Christian canon. If our faith is centered on Jesus Christ and the New Testament is all about him, they could have decided there was no need for the Old Testament. But they didn't. So I think we should be able to read the Hebrew Scriptures using our modern Christian lens, it is a part of our Bible and our faith tradition too, though handling it with some care seems like a respectful thing to do.

I know what that Evangelical minister was getting at because there are many examples of God speaking to humanity in the New Testament. Just last week, we read about Jesus' baptism, and a voice comes from heaven, which we can probably assume is the voice of God saying to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." [4] And Christians also tend to believe that Jesus is both human and divine so the words of Jesus have special resonance for us, it's not so jarring for Christians perhaps as it is for Jews to imagine God speaking to humanity, whether we think it happens much these days or not.

Maybe these days it just doesn't happen the way it used to, for Samuel in the Temple or for Jesus during his baptism. Maybe God works in more subtle ways. Maybe the voice of God is less of a booming affirmation from heaven, and more of the still small voice the Prophet Elijah hears in 1 Kings or the feelings we can have when we feel connected to a person or the universe or a calling in a deeply intense way.

Two months ago, I was in the church office with Diane when a young man came to the church asking if he could sit in the sanctuary and pray. We both agreed he could, and for those of you thinking of Safe Church protocols in your head, I ran downstairs to tell Lesley and the Nursery School teachers that a stranger was in the sanctuary praying, that he looked sad but not suspicious in my opinion, and that I would keep an eye on him and let them know when he left.

I came back upstairs from the Nursery School and found him writing a prayer request with tears in his eyes, and so he came up to the Office to speak with me. Here was a young man, actually only four years younger than me, who reached a total breaking point in a very sad life. He hadn't stepped foot inside a church building for various reasons in years. But what surprised me was how he got here. He kept saying over and over, "I don't know why I'm here, Rev., I shouldn't be here." He works in Concord and lives in Medford and our church isn't even on his way home. After getting into his car after work he began to drive, part of him knew he was going the wrong way to get home when he headed into Lexington, but he felt that he was being led somewhere by something.

Pulling into our driveway, having never seen Pilgrim Congregational Church United Church of Christ or setting foot in our doors, he knew that this is where he was supposed to be on that day. He knew that God somehow had led him here. And so we talked, we prayed together, and then he left.

If this isn't God at work in the world, I don't know what is. If this isn't God's voice somehow calling out and leading someone home, truly home, I don't know what is. We may not be able to hear the voice of God as distinctly as Moses or Jesus, but I believe that the Spirit of God is at work in the world, that the Spirit moves us and calls to us and it's up to us to listen. As Samuel says, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."<sup>[5]</sup> May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] 1 Samuel 3:10.

[2] Benyamin Cohen, My Jesus Year: A Rabbi's Son Wanders the Bible Belt in Search of His Own Faith, 87.

[3] Benyamin Cohen, My Jesus Year: A Rabbi's Son Wanders the Bible Belt in Search of His Own Faith, 88.

[4] Mark 1:11.

[5] 1 Samuel 3:10