

The chaos and noise are getting me down.

Voices swirl around us these days, demanding our attention and expecting our allegiance. On every side they are crying out against oppression – both imagined and real. Some are seeking justice; some decrying a loss of status and privilege. All are demanding action in the name of righteousness.

Voices come from the center of society and seek their own good. Some come from edges and shadows and seek to be seen and heard. Some advocate for others; some only for themselves.

How do we discern the good from the evil? To whom shall we listen?

And how will we know it is the Lord?

Today in an ancient story we meet Eli, an old man who has spent his lifetime as a prophet – one who stood before the people of Israel and boldly said “thus says the Lord” But his eyes have grown dim and he no longer sees visions. He can no longer hear a word from the Lord. His days as a prophet are over.

Why? We don’t know for sure. But we do know that at some point he stopped listening to those voices who called out his sons’ corruption and abuse of power. He chose to remain silent, allowing his sons to participate in evil. Once he knew the voice of God when God spoke, but he stopped listening when the Word of God applied to himself, and on that day he became a servant to his own needs. The ultimate consequence was his family’s destruction.

Alongside Eli we meet Samuel – a young boy apprenticed to Eli who hears a voice in the night. He can only imagine it is the old prophet Eli calling for him and so he runs to him repeatedly. Then Eli recognizes the voice he once knew so well. Eli teaches Samuel to say. Here I am. Speak Lord. Your servant is listening.

So it was that the prophet Samuel, a great servant of God, began listening for God’s voice. To whom are you listening? Who will you trust to help you discern the voices which call out to you? In the end, whose servant are you going to be?

Oh, that's easy' you say. We have Jesus, you say. Jesus teaches us the way, Jesus IS the way, in fact Jesus is the Word himself. But that isn't really an answer since many of today's voices claim the name of Jesus for their cause, justifying all manner of action and inaction in his name. Voices pronounce judgment and claim righteousness. How do WE sort them out?

When some charismatic leader summons us to follow in Jesus' name, how do we know if he or she is legit? How do we recognize the voice of the Lord and an authentic Word from God?

Well, we start with Samuel. We start by listening.....listening closely....and learning to recognize what God sounds like.

Andrew and Philip and Nathaneal face this dilemma when they hear of the new rabbi in town. Come and see they say to one another; we have found the Messiah for whom we have been waiting. The one who will save us!

We mimic them and watch and listen. We follow and observe. We stay long enough to learn who the person is at the center of this newly gathered community.

Who is being served by this voice which is claiming the name of Jesus? Who is being invited to the table to share the bounty and who is abandoned without thought? Who benefits? Who or what is condemned? Who is serving and who is ruling?

Until, in the final analysis, when you are standing on a garbage heap known as Calvary, you ask Who is being glorified? Who is taking a selfie and posting it to Instagram? And Who is the sacrificial lamb?

Do we hear the One Out Front telling us to protect ourselves, our own kind, our own assets and our own power? Or do we hear Feed my Sheep, take care of one another, and then from the cross Forgive them Father, they have no idea what they're doing.

When the Voices Speak: Do we always come out smelling like roses? OR Do we hear a voice telling us to turn around, repent of our wrong path, and take up a

cross? Is the Word always easy – or are we called to work against the great tide of injustice in this world?

Is what you are seeing Our Lord at work?

Is what you are hearing the Word of God?

To whom are you listening? Who are you following?

You and I will discover ourselves lured down paths by voices that are not God's, leading us to turn a blind eye and deaf ear to the cries of our neighbors and harboring privileges to ourselves. We will hear the judgment of others much more clearly than we will hear the judgment of our own choices. We will need an Eli of our own to help us discern the voices in the night. We will need one another to listen for God and discern our paths forward.

And the moment will come when we will, in sorrow and repentance, need to lean on the crucified one and listen for those words of love that can come only from God: Father, Forgive them.

Then like young children we begin again with Samuel's ancient words: Speak Lord. Your servant is listening.