

Sermon – January 14, 2024

Pastor Dan Hollis

1 Samuel 3:1-11

I have a fun-fact for you; I may have shared this with some of you in the past, but... who here knows or can guess what the loudest thing ever shouted by a human being was? It's a world record that was set in the 'nineties, and I promise it's not a *bad* word. Anybody have a guess? What was the loudest thing ever shouted by a person?

The loudest word ever shouted was, ironically, the word "quiet." And I think any of you who are parents probably know what I'm talkin' about, right? It was shouted by a primary school teacher named—yeah, a school teacher, that makes sense—named Annalisa Flannagan, who entered a *shouting* competition, of all things, and managed to shout the word "quiet" at *one hundred twenty-one* decibels, which is the same volume as a *chainsaw*.

And I love that she picked a word like "quiet." Not anything big or bombastic like "crash!" or "get down!" or any of our favorite four-letter words.

For one perfect moment, the loudest voice in the world... was "quiet." For Samuel in today's Scripture reading, the voice of *God* was pretty quiet too. Or at least hard to hear clearly.

In the temple of the Lord, the prophet Eli slept in his room. In another room, keeping that night's watch over the ark of the covenant, was the boy Samuel, a child dedicated to God's service, who was being trained for ministry. Samuel would have been used to the voices of temple officials calling for him to do something for them, but in those days—and that early in his service—he wasn't used to it being *God* who had something to say to him.

But that night, God chose to speak to Samuel, not Eli or any of the other prophets or temple officials. God had something to say to him: just a kid. Whether we know it or not, none of us is a stranger to Samuel's experience: God having something to tell us, and us not knowing where it's coming from. It's happened to all of us at least once, and it's happened to most of us more than once. And even after we start to realize what God's voice sounds like, it's easy for any of us to end up either missing it or misunderstanding it.

Now I'm not talking about a literal voice being piped into your head from Heaven—maybe there are a couple people out there who *do* experience it like that, but for most of us the voice of God comes to us in many *different* forms. Forms that take a lot of listening, a lot of feeling, and a fair bit of translation.

But for Samuel that night, the voice of God was just loud enough that he thought it was *Eli* calling from the other room. It took a few tries—and eventually a little help from Eli—for Samuel to realize who it was that was trying to get through to him... and when he

finally *did*, right away he responded how we *all* should when God gets our phone number: “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

What is it that God has been trying to tell you lately? Because I guarantee it’s something. Maybe something you’ve misunderstood or misheard... maybe it’s something you’ve denied or rejected... maybe the walkie-talkie of your heart isn’t tuned to the right channel... or maybe, like Samuel, you don’t realize that the still, small voice you heard was the great big voice of God.

If we take the time to listen, the voice of God can be heard in both the loud moments *and* the quiet ones. We *can* sense the power of something greater than ourselves when a windstorm or a microburst blows against the boards of our house... *and* we can feel the beauty and tranquility of a still, moonlit night that stirs our hearts like nothing else.

We can feel dwarfed by the hugeness of God in the crowded streets of a place like New York City: the *symphony* of voices and feet and traffic at *our* level, watched *over* by the grandeur of the skyscrapers towering above our heads. *And* we can know the miracle of God in the faintest coo of a happy newborn baby resting on your chest.

God lives in both places. Like how water can be a still and tranquil lake, where you can spend hours fishing and the loudest sound you hear all afternoon is the breeze rustling the leaves on the far bank... or it can be Niagra Falls, thundering one constant rush that you can feel deep down in your soul and drowns out all other voices.

Speaking of water, I’ve got *another* fun-fact for you. Relative to its size, which is only about two millimeters, the loudest animal on Earth... is called a water boatman. It’s an *insect*, and it’s the kind that walks on water—you know, like Jesus did. It sort of skates along the top of the water, and it can even sit there, like it was standing on solid ground. Well they can also go *underwater*, and when they do, once they’re down there they make a noise in the same kinda way that a cricket does when it rubs its legs together. And the *sound* the water boatman makes... is *ninety-nine decibels*, about as loud as a *freight train*.

And it’s two millimeters long! It doesn’t *sound* that loud to *us* because it’s underwater when it makes it, but that’s the sound it makes: the loudest animal for how small it is. It’s that juxtaposition: something so tiny, cradled in the silence of deep water, making such a loud noise.

We have a God that is big and loud when God needs to be, and we have a God that lives in the silence too. Remember the “still small voice” where the prophet Elijah found God. First there was a wind so strong it split rocks, then an earthquake, then a pillar of roaring fire... but when all that was done Elijah came out of his shelter and heard the still small voice of God. He found God in the voice of fragile silence.

God can do both. The voice of God can explode with strength and power and the cries of a thousand hearts pouring their *everything* out... and God can take you in God's arms, let you lay your tired head down, stroke your hair, and whisper gently the words you need to hear.

Sometimes God's voice is a storm tearing through a land that has gotten too complacent or too proud... and sometimes God's voice is the tranquil center, the eye of whatever storm is raging around you.

The example of young Samuel's story calls us to listen for God's voice, to seek to identify and understand what God is trying to tell us, and to be ever-ready to respond in faith: "Speak, for your servant is listening."

May you open the ears of your heart and *train* those ears to hear God's voice.

With ears to hear, may you listen for God's voice in the loud and bombastic and dramatic and show-stopping moments of your life—may you *hear* the voice of God when the *world* and the *people* of the world cry out...

*And* may you recognize God in the silence, the peace, the understated moments, the quiet pools of water and the bubbling streams and the comfort of solitude... may you be ready when the voice of God speaks in between the lines, straight to your heart.

God told Samuel God was about to do something that would make the ears of anyone who even *heard* of it *tingle*. Well that's true today too. There's always something just around the corner that the still-speaking still-with-us still-at-work God is about to do... that will make ripples. Big ones. Great big cosmic sound waves in the lives of the people of this world.

God wanted *Samuel* to hear about it *first*... because God needed *Samuel* to play a part in it. Just a kid, a child in the eyes of God... as we all are. What is it that God is trying to tell *you*? First, before anyone else.

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

Amen.