

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Whispers in the Soul”**  
**I Samuel 3:1-19**  
**October 15, 2017**

A lot has happened since we left off last week with the children of Abraham following Moses through the wilderness. Eventually they made their way to the Promised Land.

Moses tagged Joshua and said, “You’re it.” So, just as Moses led them across the Red Sea and out of Egypt, Joshua led them across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land.

After getting settled and renewing their commitment to God, the tribes of Israel divided up the land and each tribe did their own thing for a few generations.

This was the period of Judges. Out of that time of Judges, we have the story of Ruth, the Moabite... the outsider immigrant, who becomes the great-grandma of the future king of Israel... King David.

But we’re not to the kings yet.

Before we get there, we have the story of Samuel.

Samuel, you might say, is the last of the great Judges and, simultaneously, the first of the great prophets... and his story will be connected to a shift from twelve loosely associated tribes, to a kingdom led by kings. Samuel anoints the first king, King Saul, and then, as we will hear next week, later anoints King David.

So Samuel is another pivotal figure in this unfolding narrative of God’s people.

And I love what the Bible does to introduce Samuel. Before Samuel is anything we get *the story of his mother*... Hannah. A chapter and a half is devoted to Hannah’s story and what we see is that behind the story of Samuel is the story of a faithful women, a faithful parent, a faithful mother...

The biblical writers apparently want us to see that. Yes, God works in Samuel’s life in amazing ways. But all that has its roots in the sacrifices and the choices of his mother.

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Which leads me to a little rabbit trail this morning, but one worth chasing.

Parents, remember the story of Hannah and Samuel.

Know that what you do in your relationship with God,

matters more than you can imagine for your children’s relationship with God.

Nothing will shape your child’s faith and openness to God as much as your own. So talk about your faith with your kids. Embody your faith. Let them see how your faith matters in your life... how it shapes your choices and sacrifices.

Read the stories of faith from the Bible to your kids.

Pray with them.

Pick a scripture for the school year and memorize it with them.

Because your faith, your relationship to God, will do more to shape your children’s spirituality than any number of hours spent inside the church attending programs.

Then, as you do all that, and as they grow, remember there are no guarantees. It’s not always a one for one.

Remember, there is another parent here in the first few chapters of 1 Samuel, and that is the priest, Eli. And Eli is the counter example. Eli served as the priest in Shiloh for a long time.

But his sons grew up to become priests of the worst kind... stealing from the offering plate, using their religious position and power for sexual exploitation.

All that to say... faith is not genetic. Every generation will have to choose for themselves. So share your faith with your kids. Let them see how it matters to you personally. Let them see you sacrifice for it.

But then, give yourselves a whole lot of grace.

You're not going to be perfect. And neither will your kids. And you cannot own their choices.

So, surrender your kids to God. Remember they are a gift to you, and a gift you have to give back, whether they are 4, or 14, or 40.

***Trust them into God's care.***

Which is exactly what we see Hannah... doing with Samuel.

If you know her story, you know that she deeply desired to have a child but couldn't. So she made a promise. If God gave her a child, she would give him back to God. And that's what happened.

She had her little baby. And once he was weaned, she took him to the temple to be raised to become a servant of God. ***She trusted Samuel into God's care. It's an icon for all of us parents. It's an image for us to follow.***

I can't begin to imagine how hard that was... leaving her little 4, or 5, or 6 year old there... only to visit him once a year when she traveled back to make the sacrifices at Shiloh.

[playful here]

I can't imagine. [pause, then playful]

**But... as long as we're on the topic of giving back to God... we are headed into our pledge season, remember?!**

[Let me just say, please don't leave your first born at the church door!

Don't worry, we're not asking for your first-born! ;)]

Maybe that story will put our own giving into perspective for us. Huh?

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Ok, so enough rabbit trails. This morning we have this really wonderful story... about the little boy Samuel, there in the temple... who wasn't sleeping all that well. He keeps hearing something and keeps running into Eli's room. "Here I am!"

It's classic, right.

I mean, it's been a long time since Eli has had a little one around, and these middle of the night wake-ups were the last thing he missed about this stage of parenting.

But it always happens. And on this particular night it doesn't just happen once. It happens again, and again, and again.

"Here I am!" So startling in the middle of the night.

Now it's obvious to me... that Eli was a wise man. More wise than I am.

I don't know why, but in my 10 years of parenting his tactics never occurred to me. But he says to Samuel,

[said like you're talking to a little child]

*"You know what, next time you wake up, maybe it's God talking to you. You really probably should stay in your room and listen to see what God might be saying. You wouldn't want to miss it!"*

*"Oh, and by the way, it's a good idea not to tell me about it until the morning. You see, if you want to hear God, then you have to learn to sit by yourself for awhile."*

Brilliant.

I'm definitely pulling this one out next time.

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Of course, it's more than a brilliant parenting tactic. It's a bit of brilliant spiritual wisdom. "If you want to hear God, then you have to learn to sit by yourself for awhile."

In fact, my lead mentor in my doctoral program, Dr. Mary Kate Morse, wrote about this in one of her books. "The primary ingredients for spiritual attentiveness," she says, "are time and space."

**Enough time is needed to experience rest and openness with God.**

**A quiet and reflective space is necessary to minimize distractions and allow the inner emotional psyche and spirit to surface.**

**The Holy Spirit moves in us at those deep levels."**<sup>1</sup>

Time and space.

Of course, that's easier said than done. Time and space are probably two of the things we are lacking most in our lives, aren't they?

It's fair to say that we live in the most fast paced society in the history of the world. We live in a time like humans have never lived before.

There's always pressure to do more,  
to accomplish more,  
to be more productive.

Some of you work in jobs where that is especially heightened. You're pressured to squeeze productivity out of every waking moment of your life.

Or to have better and better results. Sure, yesterday's results were fine, but they won't cut it tomorrow. Yesterday's test scores were ok, but tomorrow's better improve.

Others of you.... are barely hanging on because of all the family pressures you're juggling. It's not the boss at the office that has you hopping. It's all those little bosses at home that we call children, with their constant demands for more and more from us. More attention. More activities. More homework. More emotional support. More worry. More uncertainty.... as they get older. There's not enough time and space in your life, is there?

Others of you are trying to juggle all your responsibilities in life and you have to start caring for an ailing spouse, or aging parent... and there's just not enough of you to go around.

Throw all those pressures into a society that  
only values your productivity, your results  
...and a society with non-stop tweets, and posts, and news bulletins from around the globe buzzing in your pocket all day, every day...

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Kate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership: Power, Space and Influence* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2008), 162.

And any moment of stillness, or boredom, or creativity is smothered out by the constant demands of our instant-communication, globalized world.

For a lot of people in our church,  
and a lot of people in our neighborhoods... there isn't a moment in your life that you'd describe as having "*enough time... and reflective space.*"

And yet... ***these are essential... for your spiritual well being.***

Or at least they are essential if you want to hear what it is God is trying to whisper in your soul.

And they are essential if you want to know this wild and mysterious God who loves you.  
And they are essential if you want to live from any depth and real joy and peace at all.

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"Go back to your room," Eli tells him, and next time say, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening."

Samuel has to be taught to stop getting up, and running around to the next room, but instead to simply be still and open.

Samuel has to be taught this. It doesn't come naturally to him, and neither for us.

There is some real learning we have to do.

It's not natural for us, is it?

We have to learn how to create the **time** and the **space**.

Parker Palmer suggests that the soul is, "like a wild animal. On the one hand it is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places." <sup>2</sup>

It can survive some of the most challenging and gut wrenching struggles life can through at it. The soul is amazingly resilient and tough.

But part of the way it survives is it's own innate shyness. Just like a wild animal, it hides in the dense underbrush and forest. In fact, if you want to catch a glimpse of it, the last thing you should do is go crashing through the woods, noisy, busy, yelling for it to come out on demand. That will never work for the soul.

This is how Palmer describes it, "If we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance. We may see it only briefly and only out of the corner of an eye—but the sight is a gift we will always treasure as an end in itself."<sup>3</sup>

So, if you want to get a glimpse of your soul,  
to hear the truth of your soul,  
and to hear the truth of the God who meets you in the depths of your soul... **time and space** are going to be essential.

You have to show up, as simply and honestly as you can with the words of Samuel, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." And wait.

And only then, ***might*** you get a glimpse.

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<sup>2</sup> Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 58.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 59

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But if we never create the time and space, then our lives will most certainly be like the life of the twelve tribes at this point in the story. “The word of the Lord was rare in our days...” the scripture say.

It's an interesting detail in the story, an interesting dynamic.

I mean, there they are... this priest Eli, in this holy place. Not only do they live at the temple, their temple is the place where the Ark of the Covenant was.

Remember, the Ark was that special box created out in the wilderness to house the tablet stones that the Ten Commandments were written on.

And out in the wilderness, the Ark was kept in the Tent of Meetings, the holy place where you could meet with God, the place where God's presence was most palpable.

And if you read the stories, it's pretty clear that the Ark somehow embodied the power and the presence of God.

And it was there! Right there in the next room!

It was there in the Temple of Shiloh with Eli.

***The Ark of the Covenant!*** The ***most holy connection*** that the people had to God.

And yet... “the word of the Lord was rare in those days.”

Apparently... having the word of the Lord etched in stone was not enough. And this is the pattern we start to see played out through the whole narrative of the Bible.

The word of God, recorded and kept... whether on stone tablets, on scrolls, or bound in Bibles, is not enough.

Because you see, God is in the business of writing on the hearts and lives of human beings.

God is interested in making the word come alive in us.

In our very being, in our hearts and minds,

in this life we are living... in every aspect of it.

At home. At school. At work.

In our private life and in our public life.

God is in the business of writing on our very hearts.

But the only way for that to happen, is for us to learn to listen... the way a small boy learned to listen...

to have time and space to be open, receptive, humble... with no agendas and demands.

“Here I am,” he said again and again.

A “Hear I am, You called?” That became, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”  
...followed by a long night of stillness.

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That's something I've been working on myself since I came back from my sabbatical this summer. As I said in my newsletter article this month, the busier I am, the more I'm realizing I need to create the time and the space to be present to God and present to my soul...

Otherwise I end up living out of my own brokenness, and my own automatic responses, and my own emotional reactivity.

It's something I've known for a long time, but I'm learning to ***live it*** in new ways.

And so, I've been cultivating a new practice where I spend more mornings not opening my computer, or looking at my phone first thing... but also not with spiritual agendas, or programs... I'm practicing simply being open and present.

That can look a number of ways.

For me, I've been using this really wonderful app called "Pray As You Go" on my drive into the office. So while I'm in the car, I hear the chiming of bells, some kind of sacred music, and a portion of scripture read a few times with space for reflection.

It's turned my morning commute from getting uptight listening to the news, to becoming open to God. In fact, I'd encourage you to get out your phones and look it up for yourselves. The "Pray As You Go" app can be one helpful tool.

Then, when I get into the office, I light a candle and simply open myself up to God... and allow the warmth of that candle to take me where it will.

Sometimes I end up journaling.

Sometimes I use my prayer beads.

Sometimes I read sacred poetry... but there's no agenda in that time. No gimmicks. No demands to accomplishing something.

I'm practicing creating time and space, to simply be open.

"Speak Lord, your servant is listening."

It's time and space... for the wildness of my own soul to come out of the shadows... and graze in the grasslands.

We all need it.

It's not just for pastors.

It's for all of us who long to "hear the word of the Lord" in our time... and to have the word of God, that is, God's love, and goodness, and presence, written into our own lives. Because it actually does reshape me and reshapes the presence I bring into meetings, and decisions, and the pressures of my day.

We all need it.

That will probably mean there are some daily practices you might want to consider.

It certainly means there are rhythms to your week and your year you need to consider.

Rhythms like Sabbath and retreats.

Maybe that means you make it a priority to attend the grief seminar next month, or make it a priority to go on a retreat, like the youth and family retreat.

Maybe schedule a few days for a silent retreat at a monastery every year, and meet with a spiritual director while you are there. It's like an annual physical, a check up for your soul. Don't wait until you have cancer to pay attention.

Because here's what I am sure of, if we want to hear the whisper of God in our souls... we need to take a cue from Samuel.

We're going to have to find the space and the time to be quiet, and still, and open ourselves up to the divine mystery there in the wildness of your souls.

And so together we pray.

"Speak Lord, your servants are listening."

Amen.

Silent Reflection:

"This is the first and wildest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness."—  
Mary Oliver, "Low Tide"

"The quick-fix mentality that dominates our impatient world serves only to distract us from the lifelong journey toward wholeness.... Solitude is essential to personal integration: there are places in the landscapes of our lives where no one can accompany us." ~Parker Palmer, *Hidden Wholeness*