

“Your Servant Hears”

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.
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And Samuel answered, “Speak, for Your servant hears.” (1 Samuel 3:10)

“Are you listening?” How many times have we heard those words, often spoken by someone we know well who is within earshot while we are somewhat distracted by something—a phone, the TV, another conversation going on in our heads. “Are you even hearing me?” “Hello!”

We all need prompts to listen, given our distraction-filled lives, and it is useful to discipline ourselves to give full attention to those deserving of it. It’s obvious, when we reflect on it, that for communication to work it involves give and take, listening and reflecting back, acknowledging and building on, collaborative decisions, and so on.

Today we turn our minds to communication *with the Lord*. Now those words, “Are you listening?” take on significant spiritual meaning. If said by the Lord, it means He has things He wants us to hear. How do we pay attention to the voice of the Lord in our lives? What is He striving to say to us? In what ways can we and do we respond? How do we ask for clarification, as we often do with others? If those words are spoken by us to the Lord, how will we know that He hears, that He understands? And how do we receive answers to our quest for guidance?

I draw your attention once again to the readings we heard earlier in the service. Samuel was one of those blessed people who could speak to the Lord directly; he could hear His voice as if the Lord were right next to him. We pick up His story, though, when he didn’t know the voice of the Lord yet. As we heard, the Lord called him by name three times, and each time he thought it was the voice of Eli, his mentor and master. This is a story, though, of Samuel discovering that vital truth: the Lord Jehovah was speaking to him. And so we get to the crux of it: you must answer, with recognition of who is talking to you, “Speak, Lord, for your servant hears.”

There are some amazing things going on here that bear our attention. There is a perfect formula at work here, in the very person of Samuel. We recall that his mother, Hannah, had prayed ardently to the Lord for a son, being childless to that point. Samuel is her answered prayer. So delighted is she that she follows through on a commitment she had made, to give him to the Lord for service in the Tabernacle. And so full of acknowledgment is she that she names that son, Samuel, or heard by God—my answered prayer. Now we turn it around and focus on Samuel able to hear the voice of God. He has this reflexive willingness to listen, demonstrated in his jumping out of bed all three times to run to Eli when he thought his mentor was calling him. We could think of it as our upbringing, our historical faith, our openness to pay attention to the guidance of parents, even our religious habits—remembering that Samuel was serving in the church, the Tabernacle at that time. But the key shift was when Samuel learned that it was the voice of the Lord Himself that He was hearing. And it changed everything: his relationship with the Lord, his ability to be a spokesperson for the Lord to the people, his understanding of his life’s work.

So for us, there is this fundamental goal of hearing and acknowledging the voice of the Lord in our lives. There is so much in our lives that is an answered prayer. We have been given so much: the Word, our church, people in our lives who call us to a higher way of listening or spiritual devotion, remains or stored up states of openness to the Lord and the things of spiritual life, a conscience which can guide us to make wiser decisions, and our own history with the Lord or sense of His providential care. By means of it all is the voice of the Lord calling to us by name, inviting us to a new level of awareness of His plans for our lives, together with direct guidance as to what He wants us to do. There is the next chapter of our lives: the things the Lord is leading us to, our role that He calls us to fill, the ways that we can serve, and the blessings He has in store when we do. All of this is represented in the person of Samuel. But for *any of it* to happen in our own lives, we have to be listening to the Lord.

So what does that look like? In any true communication there is a two-way dynamic at work. The emphasis in the person of Samuel is his eagerness to listen and his innocent responsiveness. We will come back to that. But first let's focus on the Lord's voice calling to us.

The Lord's voice. I draw your attention to two amazing readings we heard earlier in the service that help us capture the Lord's intense energy to reach us. We have that memorable quote from the Book of Revelation: "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me" (Revelation 3:10). We read concerning this: "This symbolically means that the Lord is present with everyone in the Word, and He presses there to be received, teaching how He can be" (*Apocalypse Revealed* 217). While this passage mentions the Word, others broaden it to the fact that the Lord is present period, "urging and pressing to be received" (see *True Christian Religion* 766).

I love the other passage we heard earlier in this regard. It describes "an angel standing in the sun, [crying out] with a loud voice, saying... 'Come...'" "This symbolizes," we read, "the Lord, out of Divine love and so out of Divine zeal, calling all people who have a spiritual affection for truth and think about heaven, and summoning them to the New Church and to conjunction with Himself, thus to eternal life" (n. 831).

There's so much in that description. The voice of the Lord, filled with love, is constantly calling out to us, communicating, warning, urging, inspiring, adding wisdom. His energy is always to connect and to bring hope and to remind—to encourage our best behavior so that He can bless us. He calls us to the New Church, to think about heaven and eternal life, to conjunction with Him—a life intentionally intertwined with His will and energy, to a spiritual affection for truth.

I'd live to zero in on two pervasive things that voice, together with that ardent love, is aiming for us to hear, both of which spring directly from the story of Samuel.

Our way of serving. The Lord was speaking to Samuel—to a particular person, with a particular assignment in mind. He was to be a judge and prophet, bringing the Word of the Lord to the people, leading in worship, eventually anointing kings and warning or mentoring them. As is true of so many others whose lives are recorded in the Word, the Lord invited, and needed, Samuel to step up and do important work. Think of Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3), or Mary at the annunciation (Luke 1), or Isaiah who heard those famous words, "Whom shall

I send and who will go for us?” to which he answered, very similarly to Samuel, “Here I am! Send me” (Isaiah 6:8).

In each case, the Lord saw that person’s potential. He invited them to consider a job that He had in store for them, that they were perfectly suited to. So, He calls to us by name, meaning with clear insight into our unique character (see *Arcana Caelestia* 145). He’s touching your remains, or remnant states. He brings to mind the truths that He inspired you to learn. He draws on your previously held convictions. He reminds you of similar circumstances in your past and urges you to consider wisely. He bolsters your strengths—of integrity, or protectiveness, or of compassion and kindness. In the small, daily moments of life, He is there asking you to do His will. And broadening out, He sees the roles you can fill in His eternal kingdom, the way you can fit into the Grand Man of heaven, based on your unique gifts (see *Divine Love and Wisdom* 140ff). In total He sees you, and me, and from Divine love and so out of Divine zeal calls us to conjunction, communication, with Him, and service from Him.

Does it help us to know, and reflect on the fact that the Lord sees us as incredibly capable people? That He has things for us to do that are needed, and will have impact? That we are angels in His eyes, even though works in progress, or angels in training? Can we more often say “Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears”? “I am receptive and willing to do Your will.” “If you see that capability in me, I will step forward and with Your help I will do my very best to serve.”

Calls to repent. But now we come to the second thing that jumps out of the story of Samuel’s call. It’s not all success and positive usefulness, of course. Sometimes the voice of the Lord is calling for change. It was in the case of Samuel. The very first message he heard was this: “Behold I will do something in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle” (1 Samuel 3:11). That ominous message had to do with Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who were profaning the sacrifices, taking of the forbidden fat, and aggrandizing themselves with what belonged to the Lord. As such they represent people who place themselves first or love themselves more than they are devoted to the Lord. When we are in that place, we know that bad things happen. Hurt happens. Our lower selves, or the reflexes that stem from self-love, come to the fore, and we do things that we regret.

The Lord, with that same ardent love for our salvation, and banked on the potential angel He sees in us, has messages we need to hear that may make our ears tingle. One of the most frequent refrains from the Lord, or from His agents in the Word, was “Repent.” The Lord finds ways to warn us of the disaster of discovery for hidden evils. He lets us experience painful feelings of regret and remorseful refrains in our minds when we’ve hurt those we love. Sometimes it’s to say to us in effect: “It’s time. Time to do the necessary self-examination and repentance on that thing that has been crushing your soul.” “With My help,” we may hear the Lord say, “you can be freed forever of that purge.”

“Cast away from you” [that voice says,] “all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!” (Ezekiel 18:31-32).

How do we listen for the Lord’s voice? For all this to happen: the good and the warning, the loving views of our potential and the loving calls to change, we have to be listening. So how

does that happen more pervasively? How are we actively paying attention to the Lord's voice in our lives?

I hope you have ready answers to that. We heard a passage earlier reminding us that "to hear His voice is to believe the Word, for the Word's Divine truth is the voice of Jehovah" (*Apocalypse Revealed* 218). Wow that's powerful. If we want to hear the Lord's voice, the Lord Himself talking to us, it's really as simple as opening His Word. I find it incredibly powerful, when I'm able to capture it, to think of the Lord actually speaking to me as I read in His revelations. If it is an authority for us, if we believe it has the power of order, that it works, that we can trust in the messages we receive, we are using the most powerful tool given to us by the Lord Himself. His Word, His voice, calling out to us from Divine love and Divine zeal, is available to us any time we want it, saying live this way—the way of eternal life.

Beyond reading the Word, many people resort to the discipline of prayer. "Prayer," as we might recall, "is speech with God" (*Arcana Caelestia* 2535). It's "an opening of [our] interiors toward God," and if we're asking from love and faith for things that have to do with salvation, there can be guidance: "something like a revelation which is manifested in affection of the one who prays as to hope, consolation, and a certain inward joy" (*Ibid.*).

What else helps you to hear the Lord's voice? Is it conversations about the Lord or reaching for solutions in our spiritual journeys through give and take with wise mentors? Is it quieting our minds and making space for the Lord to flow in? "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Is it listening to sermons or podcasts on spiritual subjects? Is it resolve to pay attention to the promptings of our conscience? Yes to all of the above. To the extent that we focus on these things, without getting distracted, wisdom will flow. Goodness will come to us. Peace will more likely be ours, as we place ourselves more directly within the stream of the Lord's loving and providential care.

We have to be listening. To close we come back to the words that are our calling for day: "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears." (1 Samuel 3:9,10). In the story is a reminder of fullness. Three times the Lord called, and three times Samuel rose from his bed and ran to Eli, saying "Here I am for you called me" (1 Samuel 3:5-8). Can we, with intention, learn to discern that voice as the Lord's, and commit to responsive attention to it—fully, with our whole heart, and with the devotion pictured for us in the innocent young form of Samuel?

Samuel is that part of us that is capable of a life devoted to the Lord's will. We have that innocence or willingness to follow in us. It is what allows the Lord to lead and bring blessing, and cause us to have the impact that we long in our souls to have. A loving and powerful God calls out to us to say we are needed. His voice is there giving us guidance on the small, daily ways of service and course correction, and also helping us in growing measure to discover the ways we are uniquely gifted to serve in this world and the next. We can, at the hands of the Lord, be wise, loving, regenerating and useful to the degree that we deeply and repeatedly and with commitment say to the Lord, "Speak, for your servant hears." **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word: 1 Samuel 3:1-10, Revelation 3:19-22; *Apocalypse Revealed* 831, 218.

1 Samuel 3

¹ Now the boy Samuel ministered to the Lord before Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no widespread revelation. ² And it came to pass at that time, while Eli was lying down in his place, and when his eyes had begun to grow so dim that he could not see, ³ and before the lamp of God went out in the tabernacle of the Lord where the ark of God was, and while Samuel was lying down, ⁴ that the Lord called Samuel. And he answered, "Here I am!" ⁵ So he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

And he said, "I did not call; lie down again." And he went and lay down.

⁶ Then the Lord called yet again, "Samuel!"

So Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." He answered, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷ (Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, nor was the word of the Lord yet revealed to him.)

⁸ And the Lord called Samuel again the third time. So he arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you did call me."

Then Eli perceived that the Lord had called the boy. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and it shall be, if He calls you, that you must say, 'Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ Now the Lord came and stood and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

And Samuel answered, "Speak, for Your servant hears."

Revelation 3

¹⁹ As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. ²⁰ Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. ²¹ To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

²² "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." ' '

Apocalypse Revealed 831

19:17 *Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, "Come and gather together for the supper of the great God."* This symbolizes the Lord, out of Divine love and so out of Divine zeal, calling all people who have a spiritual affection for truth and think about heaven, and summoning them to the New Church and to conjunction with Himself, thus to eternal life.

The angel standing in the sun means the Lord in His Divine love. The angel means the Lord, and the sun His Divine love. Crying with a loud voice means, symbolically, out of Divine zeal, for a voice or influx coming from the Lord out of Divine love is an expression of Divine zeal, inasmuch as zeal is a characteristic of love. Birds that fly in the midst of heaven symbolize all people who have a spiritual affection for truth and so think about heaven. To come and gather together for the supper of the great God symbolizes a calling and summoning to the New Church and to conjunction with the Lord; and because conjunction with the Lord is attended by eternal life, therefore this, too, is symbolically meant. To cry "come" symbolizes a calling, and "gather together" symbolizes a summoning.

Apocalypse Revealed 218

'If anyone hears My voice and opens the door.' This symbolically means anyone who believes the Word and lives according to it. To *hear His voice* is to believe the Word, for the Word's Divine truth is the voice of Jehovah. And to *open the door* is to live according to the Word, since one opens the door and receives the Lord not only by hearing His voice, but by living according to it. For the Lord says, "He who has My commandments and keeps them..., I will...manifest Myself to him..., and (I) will come to him and make (My) abode with him" (John 14:21-24). In The Doctrine of Life for the New Jerusalem we showed that a person ought to open the door as though on his own, by refraining from evils as sins and doing good acts; and that this is the case is apparent from the Lord's words in the present verse, "If anyone...opens the door..."