

Sermon: You Talkin' to Me?

Year B, Epiphany 2

[1 Samuel 3:1-10, \(11-20\); Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51](#)

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I have a quick question for the kids here. Do you guys know what a mortgage is? Yeah, you're close. Usually when you buy a house, it costs more than the money you have at the moment. So you get the bank to lend you the difference between what you have and what it costs and you pay the bank back over years, usually 20 or 30 years. If sell your house before then, you have to pay the bank back immediately. But if you just live in your house, you get to the point where you've paid the bank back in full. Do you guys know what a certified check is? That's when the bank writes a check, not you out of your own account. You have to pay the bank extra for it, but whomever gets the check knows that they will get all the money the check is written for.

Now that we have that out of the way. A couple of months ago, I called the people that handle my mortgage. I wanted to know how much to write the last check for because it's always a weird amount. I get this woman on the phone and ask my question and she tells me I need to send a certified check to close out a mortgage. I apologize for not being clear (although I was a little annoyed because I had been clear) and said that I just needed to know the amount for the final month's payment. She again does not tell me the amount and again says I need to send a certified check. I don't know why but all of sudden I was furious. "You mean to tell me that you have been perfectly happy to cash my personal checks for 19 years and 11 months and all of a sudden they're no good?" "Yes ma'am." she says. I never slam the phone down on anyone. But I did on her. It was petty and mean and spiteful. And stupid. But I did it. And frankly, I can't say I wouldn't do it again.

I don't want God to see me in those moments. I don't want anyone to see me in those moments. I wasn't talking some important stand against injustice. I was dealing with a small cog in a huge corporation that had behaved so badly that they had brought the economy to its knees. I sent my personal check as always and they cashed it as always. It wasn't worth getting angry over, certainly not so angry that I'm still irritated today when I will never have to deal with them again.

The person who wrote today's psalm tells me that not only did the woman see my temper tantrum, not only do you guys now see how petty I can be, but God sees. All the time. And somehow the psalmist takes comfort from that.

I would love to ask God questions. Why is the sky blue? Not the scientific refraction of light answer, but why pick to have light refract that way. Why slavery? Why evil? What was it like when Jesus died on the Cross? What about when Mary died?

I do not want to ask questions like, "how am I doing on the loving my neighbor thing?" "How about loving you?" I don't want to ask those questions because I'm pretty sure I know the answer. I know God loves me anyway, but I'm not sure I love myself anyway. You know, you have a friend who says, "I'm totally in love with her. She's a mess but I love her anyway." Some part of you just cringes, thinking, "oof, that's not going to be good for you." If loving someone who is a mess is bad for our friends, it can't be good for God. And we are all messes, all wretches like we'll sing about at the end of today's service when we sing *Amazing Grace*.

So maybe we just tune it out, live as if God isn't watching. We're Americans. We had when our privacy is invaded. But somehow we've come to terms with what happens with our cellphones and car computers, with our online shopping and library checkouts. We know information gets fed into computers that cause candidates to show up on our doorstep or call us at home during dinner. We watch CSI and all the other crime dramas on TV and we learn about all the security cameras that surround us and satellites and everything else. Today's psalm may simply tell us to add God to the long list of ways we are tracked. It's not like we're doing anything really wrong. The Ten Commandments are more or less in tact. OK, a little coveting, a little taking of a name in vain. But on the whole, nothing to get tense about. And God's supposed to be merciful.

Except that those coping skills rely on ignoring the fact that God sees everything. It's kind of hard to pretend that God doesn't see everything when God speaks to you. There's Samuel, a young teenager, twelve or thirteen, and God calls his name. Once Samuel clears up who's speaking to him, God lets Samuel know that Eli, Samuel's boss and the head priest at the temple is going to be out of a job. In fact Eli's whole family is going to lose their gig at the temple because Eli's sons have been doing some pretty unsacred things. God doesn't tell Samuel to tell Eli, God just asks Samuel to listen. Eli kind of double dog dares Samuel to tell him what God said, which Samuel does, but that's not what God told Samuel to do. It just sort of happened.

And that is the heart of the matter. Once God speaks to someone, things just sort of happen. If we ignore that God is watching, then we can strike all sorts of deals. We can make accommodations with people whose beliefs run counter to ours because we need to get along with each other. We slam down the phone of people who annoy the starch out of us and then convince ourselves it doesn't matter, that they don't matter. We can keep most of the commandments most of the time and count on God grading on a curve.

But when we really truly accept that God sees everything, then we are forced away from the edges where we live our lives, trying to set out the boundaries that everyone sees and keeping the center part private. God is with us in our private selves, in the moments we would rather not share with anyone, even those people that we share everything with. Indeed God is with us before anyone could love us and will be with us long after everyone who has ever loved is has long passed from this earth. God is with us in all the in-between spaces, where we don't have a defined edge, where we don't yet pretend to be in control.

Coming from those in between spaces, God brings something new into the world. I think people look at today's story of Samuel and Eli and they are only too happy to tell you exactly what God was doing. God was getting rid of the corrupt priestly family that was taking God's people away from where God wanted them to go. God was replacing the religious leaders with an innocent, someone who, by listening to God, would keep away from the corruption and temptation of this world. God was creating a new thing, a honest prophet for the political leaders to turn to when they needed advice. God was creating a prophet who would say something to the political leaders when they didn't really want to hear it.

But here's what I learned from today's psalmist. We can look at the story of Samuel and Eli and see all those things. We can even argue that they arose as a direct result of God speaking to Samuel. But we have no idea what God is up to. All those things that happened, that are so important to the life of the people of Israel, may just be side effects, may just be us reading into the event. What happens to the heart of a 12 or 13 year old when they know, really know that they are precious to God, so precious that God will call their name three times? What happens to

the heart of a priest when he learns that worship is so important to the life of the people with whom God has formed a covenant that God will not allow it to be done poorly? I don't know what happens. I just know that their lives are never the same afterwards. They can never go back to their life before. I don't think Samuel's or Eli's lives were easier afterwards. I think they would have had a much easier time of it if they had not accepted with their whole hearts that God knew everything and that God had spoken. God certainly had a heap of work for Samuel to do for the rest of Samuel's life that certainly sounds more difficult than anything God had asked Eli or his sons to do up to that point.

I don't know what it will do to everyone here to truly know that God sees everything we do and that God speaks to all of us. But I do know that it will transform us in ways we can't expect. I'm going to keep opening up spaces in the life of this church where we can invite God in and figure out what God is up to. We'll need to learn to speak to God and listen to God in new ways. We'll need to learn how to speak and listen to each other. By starting with the topics for Faith Formation in today's worship, I'm asking the church to begin thinking about how we give each one of our children, at a time their faith is setting deep in the inwardmost parts, a chance to hear God call their name, not once, not three times but constantly. They'll see other adults care for them, challenge as Eli does to stick with what they heard, even if the adults don't want to hear it, just as Eli didn't. It won't make things any easier. But it will make them more real. And we can join the psalmist in rejoicing that God is always with us instead of wishing that God would only see the edges we want God to see.