

Sermon: Hearing through the Cracks

Year B, Proper 4

[1 Samuel 3:1-10, \(11-20\); Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 2 Corinthians 4:5-12; Mark 2:23-3:6](#)

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There are times when I really zoom in on the Scripture, hoping to hold up some facet of the text you may not have noticed before. Somehow it seems wrong to say that the Devil is in the details, so I'll say that quite often I want to show you the Divine in the details. As detailed oriented as I am, it's not surprising that I often slow us down to look at one exquisite facet of the text, shining like a jewel.

But not today. Today we're zooming out, way out, in time and space. We're going to spend a good portion of this summer walking with Samuel and Saul, David and Solomon through the texts of 1st and 2nd Samuel and 1st and 2nd Kings. There will be plenty of details to notice along the way, but we need to get a feel for the wider context. I'll refer to this context again over the course of the summer, because it mattered to the writers of what we'll read. More importantly, though, it matters because it will help us see our lives and our world in the text that was written 600 years before the birth of Christ.

So I'm going to review a whole bunch of the Bible story to get us on the same page. You'll all remember parts of it, and we'll help each other out. Think of this as Blanket Sunday School for adults. This is going to be one of those interactive sermons where I ask you to answer my questions as a big group. You won't have to talk to one another, but you will have to talk to me.

So the Israelites are in slavery in Egypt. God sends a messenger to Pharaoh to let God's people go. Who does he send? Right, Moses. Don't be shy. We got a lot of land to get through. So Pharaoh and Moses go back and forth. Let my people go. No. Let my people go. No. What pushes Pharaoh over the edge? Right, Angel of Death moves through Egypt and kills all the first born sons except? Right, the children of the Israelites whose door were marked with blood. The Angel of Death passes over those households. That event is celebrated in the Festival of? Passover.

Now this is something that we take for granted, so we tend not to notice it and I'm not so sure we should take it for granted. The God of Israel, of Samuel and David, of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, is a God who intervenes in human history. The God of Israel is a God who does new things. And some of those new things involve destruction and chaos and upheaval. As we walking through the stories this summer, we're going to see great destruction and chaos and upheaval. Some of it is going to be because people are resisting God's Call. But some of it is going to be because God is doing a new thing. And it's not always obvious which is which.

So Moses and the Israelites head out through the Red Sea. And they wander in the wilderness for? 40 years. God keeps telling them that they are headed to the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey. What's their reaction? Right. Do we have to? Egypt wasn't so bad. The food was better and we knew where we were sleeping each night. How does God respond to that? With miracles, with water from the rocks and food from nothing. God is deeply engaged with the people, providing them with everything they need, even when they're whiny. And in the midst of this journey, Moses goes up to the top of Mt. Sinai and comes down with? The 10 Commandments. We think of them as laws. But really they are self-conscious acts of discipline

for a community that is at great risk and needs to sustain itself in the face of wonder, needs to offer gratitude to the God who provides daily miracles.¹

At the end of the 40 years, Moses goes up to the top of Mount Nebo and sees the Promised Land but does not enter it. He dies up there. It will be up to other leaders, like Joshua, to bring the people of Israel into the land. But this is the first great transition that the people of Israel make, from not being on the land to being on the land.² They only make that transition because of God's loving intervention.

When the Israelites move onto the land, they are in tribes. There is no king, no centralized ruler. And the land isn't empty. There are people already living there and they aren't too pleased to have all these Israelites show up and claim that God has given them that land. There's enormous political, economic and military upheaval. For the Israelites themselves, they have to shift from a nomadic, herding, hunting kind of lifestyle to a farming lifestyle. So just getting on the land isn't enough, there's more destruction and chaos and upheaval. Some of it comes from resisting the discipline that God imposes, some of it comes from God doing a new thing.

This is the moment we're standing in in today's reading. The moment when the tribal way of life will be swept away and the monarchy will begin to rise.

But here's the thing. All of this story, the entirety of it, is written down, is edited and formalized, is canonized into sacred text for the people of Israel some 500 years after the event. It's written down after the kingdom of Israel is destroyed. After the center of the worship of the God of Israel, the Temple in Jerusalem, is destroyed. After the people with power in Israel have been exiled to Babylon and then to Persia. The people who write this story down, know the ending and it's going to end in disaster. Complete and utter and total disaster. The destruction and chaos and upheaval will be permanent and absolute. The God of wonders, the God who asks only for gratitude, the God who is generous of gift and sovereign in demand,³ did not keep them from destruction. The God who made them so very different from all the people around them, the God who told them to look at the real world and then live as if miracle and wonder were woven into the fabric of that reality, that God did not prevent them from being taken off the land again.

So they have one question. Why? What happened that we ended up here, in exile, with nothing, with our children marrying foreigners and not raising our grandchildren to follow the God of Israel? Where can we see the first indications that we would end up here, with everything lost, off the land that God had worked so hard to get us onto?

There's an easy answer to that. They had not followed God's commands well enough. It's a simple thesis and easy to support. They have five hundred years of details to pick through and say, "see, there, there's another point where someone dropped the ball."

But what we'll see, again and again, is ambiguities. God will call a child and end the line of priests who had been promised the priesthood for eternity. The sons of that priest will be scoundrels, so disobedient that their father can't save the house of Eli from God's disfavor. But destruction doesn't come in that moment. God does something new. Samuel steps forward,

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the New Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 24.

² Brueggemann, *An Introduction*, 16.

³ Brueggemann, *An Introduction*, 100.

innocent, ready to hear, ready to speak up to his mentor and give him the really bad news. Samuel steps forward and Eli steps back.

And here's what the people who write this story down have realized. The people who are sitting in exile, off the land, with destruction and chaos and upheaval as their daily companions. Here is what they write into this story. They know about the real world. They know where this whole thing is heading.⁴

And still they write about the giving of new life in Samuel. They write about Eli and about the coming of death.⁵ But they believe and hope more powerfully than they grieve.⁶ They believe in dreams from God, and how those dreams can override the sordid realities that their old arrangements had led them to.⁷

We are in a world that is headed for disaster. You can even pick your disaster. Global warming, nuclear war, economic stagnation, rampant racism, partisan paralysis in government. We have a veritable buffet of destruction and chaos and upheaval. As people of faith, we are so entitled to say, "God was perfectly clear about what we had to do to avoid all this." Just like the writers of today's Scripture. But they didn't say that. They said that God speaks to the weakest and smallest among us.⁸ They said that we don't always know when God is speaking, we need help discerning God's voice.⁹ They said that God is patient and calls out multiple times, waiting for a response.¹⁰ They said that God brings forth new things. God has done all this before and is doing all this again. Are we willing to listen through the cracks of the destruction and chaos and upheaval? Because God is where God has always been. With us. Speaking to us. In this world. Doing a new thing. If we will only obey in ways we never did before.

But we will have to listen and live with the ambiguities, because in the end we have the word of God, but in this world it is spoken by people like Samuel. Today's reading started by saying that the word of the Lord was rare in those day (1 Samuel 3:1) and it ends *the word of Samuel came to all Israel*. God speaks. We listen. But there are cracks we have to listen through and ambiguities we have to live with. Just like back then.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 28

⁵ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 28.

⁶ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 28.

⁷ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 28.

⁸ James O. Duke, "Proper 4, Theological Perspective, 1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20)" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 76.

⁹ Duke, 76.

¹⁰ Duke, 76.