

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“If you want to hear what the Lord has to tell you, shut up and listen.” While it’s not the smoothest way to paraphrase Eli’s words to Samuel, it sure does get to the heart of the matter. Now, we should cut young Samuel a little slack, because he is just a boy after all, and all this “God stuff” is new to him. Thankfully, he has a good teacher in Eli, even if Eli is on the wrong side of God’s favor. That is why Eli, after having his sleep interrupted three times by Samuel, finally tells Samuel to shut up and listen, instead of reacting.

We are taught by Paul that we should “pray without ceasing.” That makes sense on the surface, but since it is through prayer that we are talking to God—putting a voice to our thanksgivings, supplications, confessions, and the like—if we are praying all the time, and never stop, we never have a chance to listen for God’s response to our prayers. As my mother *frequently* reminded me, God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. God *does* have things to say to us! But if we are doing all the talking all of the time, how in the world can we hope to hear Him?

Samuel was just beginning his studies with Eli, and as such, had not come to know about the ways of the Lord and how the Lord was known to come to people in visions and dreams. Samuel knew even less about the signs of God or the manner in which God called the prophets and leaders of the people whom He had chosen as his own. The ancient historians suggest that Samuel was about 12 years old when he was called by the Lord. I wonder how many 12-year-olds today would be as ready to hear the voice of the Lord? Then again, how many 52-year-olds would listen, either?

We hear that the Lord did not speak very often to the people through Eli and the other prophets. In fact, the Lord was pretty upset with the antics of the prophets—sexual impropriety, disobedience to the Law, and so on—as well as the fact that the people were in a state of turmoil, everyone taking his or her own path, declaring that the only things which mattered were those things that were important to the individual. The needs,

desires, and commands of God we OK, but if they interfered with what human beings wanted to do, then it was OK to ignore God.

Hmmm. That's really interesting. I can't imagine that happening today. No, not at all.

God knew Samuel before he was even born, just as God knows each one of us. God knew that Samuel was the right person at the right time in history to receive God's word faithfully and make it known to all of God's people. In fact, it would be Samuel who would anoint the first king, Saul, but not before warning the people of Israel that they should be aware that oppression often comes at the hands of those with political power.

Throughout the Old Testament, it is often said by the prophets and writers that God abandoned His people or stopped talking to them when He was mad at them, or when their behavior was so sinful that God wanted to punish them. Unfortunately, we have even heard this said in the 21st century in the ill-spoken words of a televangelist about the health problems of the prime minister of Israel. I'm not so certain that God has stopped talking to us or "allowed" bad things to happen simply because people have been bad. After all, in the New Testament Jesus goes to great lengths to remind the people that God is not a vengeful or mean-spirited God, but a loving Father.

Perhaps the reason we aren't hearing God speak to us is because we have stopped listening to God when He *does* speak to us. Folks today have taken upon themselves an attitude like the Israelites at the time of Eli. "Me first! God second, if at all!" People today scoff when they hear God's Word proclaimed, or declare that it doesn't apply to 21st century life, or that the one who is bringing God's word is in no place to talk—being that the message-bringer is a sinner and all that.

My friends, I stand before you as a sinner of God's creation, as your brother in Christ, as one who has been called and set apart to minister to God's people. I'm no Samuel, that's to be sure. But, as the one who has been called to proclaim God's Word in this place at this time, I am not able to shirk that responsibility.

I have spent a lot of time in prayer and reflection and, yes—hard as it might be to believe—silence. I've been begging God to open my mind and heart and soul to His call and for His gracious wisdom as to what we at Abiding Presence are being called to do. Has the time come for us to wind down this ministry? Has God's favor stopped shining upon us? Is our work here done? Has the time come for another shepherd to be called to tend to the flock and feed the sheep?

Have I so offended God that there is nothing which I can do to regain His favor?

My friends, I was listening to Paul to much that I was praying in double time without ceasing. I kept praying harder and longer because I wasn't hearing any answers. My God, why have you forsaken me?

And then, filled with so much doubt and discontent that I was truly unable to do anything, I read these verses from First Samuel. And, like a ton of bricks, it hit me.

“Shut up, stupid, and listen!”

I finally realized why I hadn't heard a word from God. I never shut up long enough to let Him get a word in edgewise.

I spent time in this sanctuary, and in my study, and at home in silence. It was one of the hardest things I ever did. But in the silence, I began to hear God's Word again. I heard God's Word of grace and love. I heard God's Word of hope and perseverance. I tested what I heard, trying to take the opposite position—close the church, leave the ministry, let these people find another pastor—and every time the Word of God was clear in reply:

Nice try, Art, but even you don't believe those are the right answers.

No, I don't. God is not done with Abiding Presence, and we haven't fallen from God's favor, and now is not the time for me to leave this place or set aside the

ministry to which I have been called by you. Nor is it time for you to turn to the secular world for guidance and instruction. The ways of the world are not God's ways, and we are called to follow God's ways, not human ways.

God didn't send his only Son into the world so that we might be condemned and forgot. No, God sent His Son into the world so that we might live life and live it abundantly! Our future didn't die on the Cross with Jesus of Nazareth, but was born again in the Resurrection of Christ from the tomb.

God hasn't left us. God is with us, right here, right now. And, God will be with us in the week ahead, and will have something to say to us next Sunday, too.

I guarantee it.