

# “Listening With Trust”

Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18 and 1 Samuel 3:1-20

January 14, 2024 ~ Ordination and Installation of Church Officers

The Reverend Kim Wadlington  
Market Square Presbyterian Church  
Harrisburg, PA

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I had a glorious 5 days with Derek and my children at Christmas. Another week with Derek, Priscilla, and Zeke but school started for Derek last Monday, Priscilla left yesterday and I'm driving Zeke back to Cleveland today. I miss having other people in my home when they're all gone and I miss the close relationships we have. Derek and I have been married for 28 years, 23 or maybe 24 of the best years of our lives we jokingly say, and there's a kind of knowing that comes along with that when you're paying attention to one another. A relationship in which you often know what the other person is going to say perhaps even before they do, or you can complete one another's sentences, even though it's best if you don't! I try to remind myself when we're apart, and even when we're together, that the closeness we have is simply a glimpse of the intimacy of relationship we have with God who knows us, loves us, and is never far away.

Psalm 139 beautifully describes this kind of knowing and being known but there is also being cherished. Sometimes when human beings have this type of relationship, we rush to complete one another's sentences not allowing for someone to surprise us or we recite someone's catch phrase back to them in a mocking way. But this God who knows our thoughts from far away is neither mocking nor without the capacity to allow space for us to change and grow.

The psalm is attributed to King David, but whomever first prayed Psalm 139 was a person able to rest secure in the sure and certain knowledge of God's love, and of the way God's love alone makes us worthy in God's eyes, while also humbly recognizing the need to bow the knee before the mystery of God.

Trust in God's love for each of us as individuals enables each of us to trust that God has our best interest at heart. Humility before God enables us to remember that God has the best interest of everyone else at heart too. That's a hard needle to thread and often we put those two things on the opposite end of a continuum. What's good for me at one end, what's good for all people at the other end, but it doesn't work that way in God's economy and it's important for us to remember that as we seek to live in communities with one another and as we work and fellowship and grow together in this community of faith.

On a day that we ordain and install new leaders for the church it's my hope that each of you, stepping into leadership, has this understanding of God's love for yourselves. I hope you know that you have been chosen by the Spirit, precisely because of who you are in this moment and also because of who you are becoming as you are attentive to God's word, faithful in your prayer life, and committed to the church, the body of Christ. It's my hope that each of us affirming these leaders today has the same sense for ourselves so that we can receive their leadership rightly.

Trusting that God has our best interest at heart as both individuals and as a community is easiest when things feel like they're going well. In times of turmoil or even simply transition and change it's harder to trust. Today's Old Testament story of Eli and Samuel illustrates aspects of that.

Samuel is the child of Elkanah and Hannah, having been gifted to Hannah when she threw herself on the temple steps in tears and prayer, asking the Lord to end her barrenness. Eli, the temple priest, was seated at the doorpost and chastised Hannah for drunkenness until she explained her situation. After Samuel is weaned, Hannah brings him back to the temple and gives him into service to fulfill the vow she made to God.

Samuel is now ministering to God under Eli, but the word of the Lord is rare in those days and Eli, whose sight has begun to grow dim, has many problems within his own house. Not only did he fail to recognize that Hannah was in prayer those years ago, but Eli's sons are abusing their positions as priests, taking the best of the sacrifices for themselves and assaulting women who are in service at the temple. Eli has already been told by another prophet that the end of his house is near because of them if he doesn't discipline them, but he hasn't done anything.

One evening while Eli is lying in his bed and Samuel is in the temple near the ark of God, the Lord calls to Samuel by name. Samuel, thinking that it's Eli calling him runs to Eli's bed. Eli says, "I didn't call you go lie down again." This happens a second time with the same result. The third time Eli finally figures out that it's the Lord calling Samuel and he instructs Samuel, "go back to bed and if the Lord calls again respond, 'Speak Lord for your servant is listening.'" The Lord does call again, Samuel responds, and the Lord gives him a challenging message, "I [the Lord] am about to do something that will make the ears of all Israel tingle." In short, God is about to bring about the forever punishment and downfall of Eli's house. Forever. Samuel receives the word but is understandably afraid to tell Eli.

In the morning, Eli demands to hear what Samuel was told by God, browbeating the boy into it, and Samuel tells him. Here is the really surprising part, Eli responds, "It is the Lord, let him do what seems good to him." Eli can affirm what God shares with Samuel and respond obediently. If his self-defense mechanism kicks in and he's tempted to dismiss Samuel as a misled novice, he holds that worse instinct in. I can only imagine that he still trusts God implicitly even if he couldn't take that step of disciplining his sons. His compliance is a confession of both his own sin and his trust. There's much for us to glean from this story as you continue through a time of transition and as new leadership takes its place both today and in the future.

Samuel is learning how to listen to God. Listening to God takes practice and attention, in the same way our human relationships need that. We need to allow space, time, and a posture of receptivity for the other person to speak to us. It's been a while since you've had any Mary Oliver read to you from this pulpit, and I love her poem entitled *Praying*, which captures this stance well:

It doesn't have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
small stones; just  
pay attention, then patch  
  
a few words together and don't try  
to make them elaborate, this isn't  
a contest but the doorway  
  
into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak.<sup>i</sup>

Eli has forgotten how to listen to God, likely because he hasn't been doing it much lately. But he remembers enough to be a guide to Samuel and while we don't know, I do wonder if his own faith isn't rekindled both by the correction he receives, but also because he needs to rise to the occasion to guide Samuel.

Perhaps after this, they do talk more about what God is saying, I'm really just imagining now, but I do know that listening to God is best done within community. Because most of us won't hear an exact voice speaking to us, the way we do in conversation with another person if we're listening well and it takes a multiplicity of listeners and it takes a multiplicity of different types of people to even approximate the fullness of God.

As much as we wish it were a straight path, it does sometimes take trial and error, we need to be willing to risk making a move to see if it's the right one and if we're listening rightly. Sometimes we know best in hindsight whether we've listened well. And in hindsight, sometimes we see that we've taken the correct steps all along but sometimes we see that we've wandered or even been unwilling participants in what God is doing. And yet, God, whose mercy is never ending, will use our choices, continuing to direct us toward obedience from which comes fruitfulness.

OT Scholar Stephen Chapman says that the story of Eli and Sameul demonstrates that "God will raise up faithfulness in the debris of human unfaithfulness. And in a religious world where we often cling to the husks of things long dead, this is good news. There is a new generation coming...The best days of God's people are not behind us... No, the best are still to come, with

yet more prophets, and an entire world redeemed. God's people cannot be known for our nostalgia. We must be known for our hope."<sup>ii</sup>

You are blessed as a community to have BOTH long standing faithful leaders *and* new faithful leaders. I hope that you too move forward with hope. And as you move forward, pray for your leaders, hold them accountable to your mission statement and to the core values that we'll talk about as a community on January 28<sup>th</sup>, but do so with grace, trust, openness and a willingness to let them lead as *they* listen to God with trusting hearts.

Here we go into a new year, with new leaders and with long standing leaders making new commitments. Will all of those being ordained and installed please come forward!

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<sup>i</sup> Oliver, Mary. *Thirst*. Beacon Press. 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> Byassee, Jason. Working Preacher. *Commentary on 1 Samuel 3:1-10 [11-20]*. First Reading Commentary for RCL January 14, 2024. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-1-samuel-31-10-11-20-7>