

1 Samuel 3:1-10

How well do you know the Lord? Well enough to recognize His voice? Young Samuel didn't. When the Lord called to him, he thought that Eli was calling. Three times he ran to where Eli was laying down and said, "*Here I am, for you called me.*" We can hardly blame the boy for making this mistake. Samuel knew that only he and old Eli were there in the temple. It was natural for him to assume that the call of God was the call of the man in the next room.

This is a mistake that we want to avoid--thinking that it's a mere man speaking to us, when really it's the voice of God. Here we are, just like Samuel and Eli were, in the house of God this morning. Now I'm not as advanced in years as Eli was, but nonetheless, it would be easy for you to assume that it's just the voice of old Eli up here in the pulpit, when really it is God who is speaking to you.

Eli probably had some good things to say to young Samuel from time to time. And there may be some things that this Eli up here could say that are worthwhile. But the best advice for you is this: if it's only Eli speaking, you should do what young Samuel was told to do--go back to bed and enjoy your sleep. But if it's not Eli, but God who is speaking, it's time to sit up and listen.

What does God's voice sound like? Three times Samuel heard Him call, but never did the boy say to himself: "This isn't a mere man calling me; it sounds like the voice of God!" No, each time he heard his name being called, he ran to Eli.

If you have seen movies such as *The Ten Commandments*, where at some point in the movie God is speaking, His voice is unmistakable. It booms forth. It thunders. It's a commanding voice, not a mere whisper in the night. Had Samuel heard such a voice, he would have known immediately that it was not old Eli calling from the next room.

What does God's voice sound like? Whenever Jesus spoke it was God speaking. But people did not cry out when He spoke: "The voice of God and not of a mere man!" They cried these very words when King Herod spoke in Acts 12: "*The voice of a god,*" they cried, "*and not of a man!*" But immediately the Lord struck Herod and he died on the spot.

Here's the challenge...it's easy to assume that it's a man speaking when really it's the voice of God, and it's tempting to say that it's God speaking when in reality it's just a man. We don't want to get our Herod's and Eli's mixed up like many do. They're convinced that God is the one speaking to them, but really it's just Herod. And they think it's just Eli speaking when really it's God.

Does it matter? It sure does! Had Eve known it was Satan speaking to her from the serpent, she may have turned away from his voice. And because he was successful with our first parents, Satan knows this same trick will work on us.

I have seen people become discouraged and throw up their hands in frustration in searching for the truth. "Who do I listen to?" they cry, "Who do I believe?" They church-hop from church to church. They read spiritual books. They listen to well-meaning friends. But there are so many Herod's out there claiming to be, even sounding like, the voice of God, and people become deceived. Satan makes sure of it. And then when these same people do hear God speaking, Satan tries to convince them that it's just old Eli and not God at all.

How do we tell the difference? It may be helpful for us to look again at the story of Samuel and Eli. Young Samuel was in the habit of coming to help whenever he heard Eli calling. He was there in the temple to assist the priest. No wonder he jumped out of bed and ran to Eli when he thought he heard him calling. Three times he did this.

But then Eli figured out that it was God who was calling Samuel. And his instructions to the boy are important for us as well. Samuel was not to jump out of bed and get ready to serve when he heard God calling him. Rather, he was to stay where he was and listen. He was to say, "*Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears.*"

This is how we recognize the voice of God. Not when it thunders forth. Not when slick, well-dressed evangelists on television speak in a commanding manner. When God is the one who is speaking, He wants us not to first jump into action, but instead to open our ears and listen. For even though we are His servants, when God speaks, He is the one who is serving us.

It's not that way with all the Herod's that we hear out there. When Herod speaks, it's all about you, or all about him, and what you must do. Holy Baptism becomes your work for God and not God's work within you. When Herod speaks, the Lord's Supper is not Jesus serving you with His gifts, His very body and blood; it's you doing something to please God and obey Him. When Herod speaks, it's all about you taking action and doing what God requires, and if you don't, you really aren't His child.

But that's not the voice of God. God speaks to you, and through His words He gives you His gifts. God speaks not to demand, but to give. God speaks not to point His finger at you, but to point at what Jesus has done for you.

In your baptism it is God speaking, not Eli. He is declaring that you are His forgiven child, not just when you avoid sin, but always, You are always His child in Christ. In the Lord's Supper it is God speaking, not Eli. He is forgiving your sins through the Lord's body and blood being given for you. In Holy Absolution it is God speaking, not Eli. He does not tell you what you need to do in order to be forgiven, as Herod tells you. He forgives you freely because Jesus came to serve you on the cross. When Jesus cried, "*It is finished!*" it was the voice of God declaring that everything has been done to win your salvation. There is nothing left for you to do. Jesus did it all for you.

Today you see old Eli up here. His lips are moving. Words are coming out of his mouth. And there are people who are fooled. They don't take his words seriously. Just as they don't take their baptism seriously, or the Lord's Supper seriously, or the words of forgiveness that your Eli speaks to you seriously.

Young Samuel was fooled also. Over and over he could only assume that Eli was the one calling. And it would never have dawned on him. He never would have figured it out on his own that it wasn't Eli, but God. Eli had to point it out to him, and then he understood and believed.

Well, this old Eli wants you to know and believe that there is something greater being said today than just the words of Eli. There is someone greater here than just Samuel and Eli. God is here. This is His house. You are His dear children in Christ. The words, the message given here is His. It's a message of joy, and hope, and comfort. It's pure forgiveness for you no matter who you are or how you have lived.

Herod has no place here. It's not about you and what you do. Yes, you are God's servants, and you serve Him well. But when God is speaking, as He is today, it's time to stop serving and listen. It's time to say, "*Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears.*" Amen.