

“The Eli Implant”

I Samuel 3:1-20; John 1:43-51

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Voice mail: the blessing of the modern age. You can reply to an inquiry, activate a credit card or leave a message and avoid conversation with a lugubrious relative, all without ever interacting with a human being.

Voice mail: the curse of the modern age. You exchange three messages and ***still*** don't have the information you need. Social interaction skills erode. And some folks say “You didn't return my call” and you say “Did you leave a message?” and they say “No, I just thought you'd see that you missed my call.”

Did you ever wonder what would happen if God installed voice mail? *“Thank you for calling My Father's House. Please select one of the following options: Press 1 for a request. Press 2 to leave a thanksgiving. Press 3 to complain. For all others, press 4.”*

So you press 1 and hear: *“Please wait to hear the entire list of options. To have King David sing a psalm for you, press 5. To find out if your relative is here, enter their date of death and listen to the list that follows. For reservation information or to confirm your reservation in My Father's House, press letters J-O-H-N followed by the numbers 3:16. To know what your pastor is doing at this moment, press 7.”*

So you press 7 – don't you? – and hear *“We're sorry. All of the angels are helping other customers right now. Please stay on the line and your call will be answered in the order in which it was received.”*

Thank God it isn't like that. God hears us all the time. What about us? Do we hear God? And do we listen?

Hearing and listening are two different things. Ask anyone who has hearing loss. One of the more successful and controversial remedies to hearing loss is the Cochlear Implant (1) – a device which, when surgically placed under the skin, is connected with tiny wires to the cochlear canal in the inner ear, then fastened to an externally-placed microphone, which allows a sort of hearing for the hearing impaired.

There are a number of reasons the implant is controversial. Cost is one. Effectiveness is another. It can be initially difficult to distinguish among different sounds, and training and discernment over time is required to maximize the effectiveness of the device. One does not suddenly “hear,” as hearing people understand that. A third reason for controversy comes from a portion of the deaf community that views sign language as preferable to the limited effectiveness and cost of cochlear implants.

But we know technology advances. What if this technology, under continued refinement, allows not only hearing but listening and perception as well? What if it made real listening possible? And what if a similarly-advanced device existed for the *spiritually* listening-impaired?

It does. We may have to wait for continued improvement of the cochlear implant, but we don’t have to wait on improving our listening to God. We can do it today.

In the story from First Samuel, hearing isn’t Samuel’s problem. Listening is. Samuel is serving in the temple. He got there through his mother Hannah who, unable to conceive, promised the Lord in prayer that if she bore a child that child would be committed to the Lord forever (2). She did indeed have that child, Samu-el, whose name means “God has heard.”

(1) www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/cochlear-implants

(2) I Samuel 1:11

So Samuel is serving in the temple under the mentorship of the priest Eli. But the story tells us *“The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”* (3) When Samuel hears a voice he perceives it wrongly. His ears are tuned to hear what they are conditioned to hear. He thinks it is his mentor, Eli, calling him.

Eli is not doing much better. Like the limited efficiency of cochlear implants, he doesn’t get it right, either. Three times Samuel comes to him and twice Eli sends him back to bed. The third time, though, Eli realizes who is issuing the summons and answers, in effect, *“It’s God calling.”* What Eli **says** to Samuel is *“Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”* (4) Eli’s insight is the Eli Implant: a helpful tool, a holy gadget tuning Samuel’s ear into the Divine sound wave. ***“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”***

The Eli Implant works not only for Samuel but for anyone. It helps us hear God’s voice and distinguish it from the chaos of other sounds around us. It helps us be clear about what is God, and what God is not, saying. We often hear well enough but background noise garbles the message. Consider the kind of noise we run into that garbles God’s message to us.

Sometimes we do not hear what someone is saying because of cultural noise. We can’t relate to someone’s cultural background. Or we find an accent difficult to understand, which irritates us or makes us frustrated at having to work hard to understand, so we quit trying. We forget that we are all children of God and that perhaps, just perhaps, we sound to them like we have an accent, too.

Sometimes there is emotional noise. We are so stressed that all we can hear is the noise of our stress. We don’t even

(3) I Samuel 3:1

(4) I Samuel 3:9

try to listen; or, if we do, it is sifted through the filter of *“I can hardly manage my own self, let alone listen to you.”* We forget that Jesus extended this invitation to each of us: *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”* (5)

Or maybe there is socio-economic noise. We are in a different social or economic place than the one to whom we are listening. We have difficulty connecting with them because they are poor or because they are rich. Or because they are formally educated or educated by life. While not the central text for this message, this condition is illustrated perfectly by today’s Gospel. Philip tells Nathaniel that he and the other disciples have found in Jesus the fulfillment of Moses and the prophets, but Nathaniel’s disdainful reply is *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* (6) with Nazareth seen as an ignorant backwater. Our listening is impaired because we think – may God have mercy on us! – that we are “above” or “below” the other. We forget that we are all made in the image of God.

This condition is also perfectly illustrated by recent comments of the President of the United States concerning restrictions in immigration, and the expressed preference for immigrants from Norway as opposed to Haiti or some African nations. Bishop Bickerton has urged us to speak out, and that is what I am doing, decrying both the vulgarity and the substance of the President’s remarks. Bishop has urged us to express our support for releasing Ravi Ragbir, one of our partners in the New York Conference Immigration Task Force. I distributed that information last evening to our Yahoo electronic mail group, and will provide it for any who desire it.

(5) Matthew 11:28

(6) John 1:46

You may also speak out by attending this afternoon's 4 p.m. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. observance at City Hall. The principal speaker is the Rev. Dr. Bonita Grubbs, Executive Director of Christian Community Action in New Haven, which our church has supported for many years. Carol and I will be attending and invite you to join us. Or you may respond generously to today's special offering, which seeks to address the socio-economic disparities many of us mourn. Again, our **ability** to hear the voice of God is emboldened by our **ability to remember** that we are all made in the image of God.

Our ability to hear God's voice can be dulled by intellectual noise generated by our disagreement with the speaker. We think of how we will reply instead of fully listening to what is being said. One of the things I firmly believe, generally but especially in the context of the Church, is that people of good will disagree. It impairs our ability to listen when we impugn the motives or integrity of those with whom we disagree. It thwarts open and clear communication and, more importantly, understanding within the Body of Christ. In this time of pastoral transition my prayer is that we, as individuals and as a congregation, will be especially attentive to this kind of listening-impairing noise.

For most of us, our body's hearing equipment is fine but these noises I've described prevent us from listening. Our spiritual inner ear is God-given; but worldly, secular and selfish noise prevents us from hearing the Spirit of God. Careful and attentive listening to the Good News of God, to the voice of God spoken to us, is what Jesus had in mind when he asks us "*Do you have ears and fail to hear?*" (7)

If any of this sounds familiar to you as it does to me, then the Eli Implant is for you as it is for me! It is the seven words of prayer that Eli gave to Samuel:

(7) Mark 8:18b

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

It is a request, and an invitation. It’s one you don’t have to access by pressing your touch-tone telephone. It’s a confession that you want to hear God’s still, small voice among the many competing voices in a sound-saturated society. It is a concerted effort to tune out the distracting babble and tune into the bandwidth of God. The Eli Implant – *“Speak, for your servant is listening”* – is a statement of faith that you believe that God has something to say to you; and to the person next to you; and to the person who disagrees with you, so that we might know what God is calling us to be and do today.

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Amen.