

June 2, Ordinary 9B (1 Samuel 3:1–10, 11–20)

Opening up space and time in our lives is one way to invite God to speak.

by [Nanette Sawyer](#) in the [June 2024](#) issue

In Samuel's time, visions were not widespread and the word of the Lord was rare. The same could be said of our own time. As the young Samuel is learning to listen for God when he first serves in the temple under the tutelage of Eli, he mistakes God's voice for the voice of his human teacher at first. This makes perfect sense.

We learn by listening to many voices in our lives: our teachers, our parents, our mentors, self-help books, best practices articles, TV shows, even TikTok. Not all voices guide us toward wisdom. There is a lot of traffic in our heads—crowds of opinions, uncertainties, fears, desires, plans, timelines, career options, regrets, frustrations, doubts. We distract ourselves from some of this busyness by watching funny cat videos or binge-worthy TV. We spend mental energy replaying events in our past and imagining scenarios in the future, so much so that we may not be fully aware of what's happening right now.

In the midst of so much noise, how will we know when God is trying to get a word in edgewise? Like Samuel, we may spend time running to our human teachers, checking with them. What do they think would be best? Perhaps if I read one more article or one more book or talk to one more expert or look them up in an online video, perhaps then I'll know what my next step is. Then I'll know what my purpose is, how to live my life in a meaningful way. To which teachers should we listen? Like Samuel, in a way we are all learning to listen for God continually, even today. When Eli recognizes that God is speaking to Samuel and Samuel doesn't even realize it, Eli's advice is that Samuel go lay down. Go back to bed. Take a posture of invitation toward the still small voice of God. Tell God, "Speak." And then listen.

Many great teachers, mentors, preachers, and guides have given us advice similar to Eli's. Parker Palmer calls it listening to our soul rather than to our role. Palmer has taught that co-listeners in circles of trust can help us hear the wisdom in our souls.

He cites Thomas Merton when he describes a hidden wholeness within us.

Howard Thurman calls the work listening for the voice of the genuine deep within us. "If you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls," he said in a 1980 baccalaureate speech at Spelman College.

Learning to listen for God's voice is a discipleship project we're all invited to. I love to run to these great teachers and others and to read their words again and again. They help me a great deal. But what really changes me is when I actually take their advice and grow still, invite, and listen.

Opening up space and time in our lives is one way to invite God to speak. For myself, I have to listen for the silence that is underneath all the busy words. I have to allow myself to sit and stare at something beautiful for long moments, without distracting myself with busyness. I have to allow some tasks to go undone so that I have time to just be, to listen to silence. When daydreaming is not obsessing, sometimes it opens up spaces for clarity to shine through and new possibilities to blossom in my mind. Sometimes that is God, too, giving me insight that I could not find in all my striving.

As we listen, how can we know whether we are hearing the voice of the genuine deep within us or the internalized voices of the expectations of others? Part of the answer to that is rooted in how we feel, physically and emotionally. This is another way of saying, "Test the spirits." One mentor advised that when I imagine an answer to a question I have, I should examine the subtle feelings in my own body. Does that answer cause my heart to lift, or does it cause my shoulders to sag? Does the idea give me a glimmer of hope or fill me with a sense of dread? The voice of the genuine is often shrouded by other voices, and learning to distinguish between them is not simple. But it is essential to our flourishing.

Just as Samuel needs to learn from Eli, we too need to learn from the experience and guidance of others. And we also need to lie down (sit, wait), to invite, and to listen. "Speak, God, for I am listening." This is what it's like to live in the middle of our own stories. We have choices to make about our next steps. Having a word from God can help us to choose wisely.