

Are Your Ears Tingling?

I don't know what voices you hear in the night, but when you awake to your name being called, your first thought is probably not that the voice is God's. That did not occur to Samuel either. After all, the word of the Lord was rare in those days. Direct encounters with God by visions or a voice in the night were not something to be expected. Samuel on the other hand is accustomed to being summoned by Eli. Samuel is still a boy here, but he has lived in the house of the Lord as long as he can remember. His mother, Hannah, wanted a child for so long, not blessed with pregnancy, that she made a vow to God, if God gave her a son, she would dedicate the boy to the Lord's service. Samuel was born, and Hannah kept her vow. While still a little boy, Samuel came to live in the house of worship at Shiloh where the ark of the covenant is kept. Eli's family lives and serves here as priests. Samuel serves Eli. I imagine he gets all sorts of odd jobs including fetching Eli a drink of water in the night.

Usually we stop reading this story at verse 10, with Samuel replying to the voice of God, "Speak, for your servant is listening." Anyone interested in what he heard? The word of the Lord, which was rare in those days, gave this message:

"I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle." (3:11)

God is about to do something that will set your ears to buzzing! I wonder if folks then thought of the world as we tend to, that God is God, but our lives tomorrow will likely be much like our lives today. Now comes the word that will set your ears to tingling and maybe give you vertigo. God is about to do something. That sounds hopeful, if vague. But here with Eli and Samuel and his mother we get a concrete example of what it looks like when God does something new. It looks different to each of them, but it sets all their ears tingling and makes them dizzy.

To Hannah, *God doing something looks like a change in how things are run*. She has been sitting at home singing a song about it. (chapter 2) Listen:

"There is no Rock like our God... let not arrogance come from your mouth... the bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength... those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat... the Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts... he will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness... the Lord will give strength to his king..."

Hannah is singing about her own experience: how God took her from her barrenness and unhappiness and exalted her with birth and a son. Her song also anticipates what God is about to do, knocking down Eli's family from its priestly position of power, delivering justice to those ill-served, and lifting up the lowly Samuel to be the one who anoints the first king. Her song *tingles* with what is about to unfold by the power of God. Hannah's song reveals that God is heavily invested in the welfare of the weak, the powerless, poor, hungry, dispossessed, and the barren.

And what was that about a king? If there is to be a king, as God re-shapes the future, then the king must be *God's kind of king*. That means the king must be dedicated to what is good for the lowly. The king as God's king must serve the reversals of power described in Hannah's song, for the good of the poor and justice for all. That is how "God doing something" looks to Hannah. She thinks it's great and is dancing in the end zone.

For Eli, what God is doing is **disastrous**. It is a personal tsunami. His sons are louts and lechers who abuse their role as assistant priests. They extort offerings for themselves and commit blasphemy in the house of worship. Eli cannot seem to make them behave, and he cannot fire them since to be a priest is a family affair. Now the word of God to Samuel inaugurates a new state of affairs that will wash away the life he has known. Despite Eli's failings, the "lamp" of faithfulness had not yet gone out in him; he finally realizes the voice must be God's. In the morning, Eli insists that Samuel report exactly what the Lord has told him. What Eli hears sets his ears to *tingling* with warning and dread, the word of judgment upon him, shame and ruin. The message condemns the house of Eli which will lose its position and power: bad news for Eli, but good news for Israel. He is old, 98 years, yet the lamp of God in him had not yet gone out. His response is grace and submission, "*It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.*"

Eli interests me. In a world we try to make black and white, his is grey and ambiguous, one in which the real challenge of faithfulness and trust is when *what God is doing* implies our own loss or even downfall. "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him," even if that means losing my position, livelihood, reputation, and security. Eli is invested in the old order of things, as most of us are. Certainly I am invested in a religious order of things, an economic order, and a political order of power that serve me rather well. What do we say to a word from the Lord that upsets and undoes and overturns this order for the common good and the purpose of justice, but to our loss, and yet the lamp has not gone out? What do we say to something that lifts up others who are lowly and need a break, but at our own expense? That is how it looks to Eli, what God is doing.

For Samuel, what God is doing **sets his ears to tingling** with a vocation. God is doing something new, and Samuel is part of it. Eli is out, Samuel is in. The old political ways are out, a king is in. And Samuel will anoint the one to be king. That will be his vocation from God, to anoint King Saul, and when that goes bad, anoint David. From errand boy to kingmaker: It is not as good a job as it sounds, but it is what he is called to do in the new thing God is doing.

For most of his young life he has been working in the house of God, doing all sorts of stuff great and small, as have some of us, but not hearing the word of the Lord, not even expecting to. He never does figure it out on his own. Eli helps him. Eli discerns that God is calling. He needs Eli to help him understand the tingling of God's call and accept his vocation. It still works that way, doesn't it? We need each other: who is it that helps you to hear God, receive your calling, and find your vocation.

That is how it looked to Hannah, to Eli, to Samuel -- how *God doing something* in their world affected them personally. How does it look to you? This word of the Lord has not ceased to be spoken: "*I am about to do something... that hearing of it will make your ears tingle.*" It may be *what God is doing* today is about to change your life. **Are your ears tingling?**

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