

In our "The Story" sermon series today, we are transitioning the stories from the times of Judges to the times of Kings. The stories from the times of Kings are almost like the stories of the "Game of Thrones," an American fantasy drama series created for HBO.

If you are familiar with the story of this fictional Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, you might enjoy the stories from the times of Kings in the Bible more than others because those stories are almost like the "Game of Thrones." As we hear the stories of kings in the Bible, we will see the "Game of Thrones" changing the human names who would take the Thrones of Israel. It was a long and painful history as men and women vied for power, failing to obey God's word.

Today, we have the story of Samuel, which is the "Biblical Game of Thrones" prequel. Samuel is the last Judge of Israel who anointed Saul as the first king of Israel. When the 12 tribal leaders came to Samuel asking for an earthly king, they had already decided to "dethrone" God as their King. So, God gave the Israelites the king they wanted.

The central theme throughout Samuel's life is that God alone should receive glory and honor. After making his sons judges, it must have been unfortunate for Samuel to learn that they were unfit to lead (1 Samuel 8:1-22). When he consulted God about the people's request for a king, nothing was said to defend his sons. Samuel was obedient to God's instructions to give the people what they wanted.

A key verse in the life of Samuel relates his words to King Saul, saying, "To obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22). Obedience to God's Word was his priority in life, and I believe that it should be ours as well. To obey, we need to listen first. Samuel was a listener.

Today, we will focus on his first experience of God encountering from 1 Samuel 3:1-10. Our little friend, Finau Mateaki, read this scripture today so well. Like Samuel when he was called, Finau is ten years old. She passionately said "YES" to the call she received to be the scripture reader for today. In the conversation with her, I've learned that she would like to be a photographer to capture the moment of beauty in life. So, I asked her about becoming a photographer-pastor who captures

the moment of beauty and shares this beauty for God. She asked, "Can I be it?" I said, "Of course. Why not?" So, now she is exploring the possibility.

I would like to invite you who are worshiping with us today to pray for her with me and with her parents. Our young people need the Lord. Our young people need our prayers and support. Our young people are listening. We, the grownups, have lessons to learn from our young people. Samuel, the last judge in the Bible, was a listener of God. So, God had chosen him to be God's partner in those days when people did not listen.

Anyone who read the Old Testament knows that God often spoke directly to His people. He talked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3); He warned Noah of the flood that was coming and provided instructions to build an ark (Genesis 6); He spoke to Abraham on multiple occasions, calling him out of idolatry and sending him to a new land (Genesis 12), testing his faith (Genesis 22), confirming His covenant (Genesis 15); and He called Moses to lead Israel from a burning bush (Exodus 3); and here in 1 Samuel 3 today, God not only spoke but even stood before Samuel in the middle of the night.

And the natural question that many people ask is: Why doesn't God do that anymore today? Does God have laryngitis? Are we doing something wrong? Do we need more flashing lights, pumping bass and emotional praise music, and, certainly, more inspiring, visionary preaching to get God to loosen up?

Ironically, agent Dana Scully on the TV show *The X-Files* suggested that maybe God is speaking, but no one is listening. Suppose we believe that 'in the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son' (Hebrews 1:1-2a). In that case, we realize that only half of agent Scully's suggestion is up for debate: God is speaking. The question is: Are we listening?

Since technology has given us more ways to communicate than ever before, there are very few excuses for us to be "out of touch." More often, if we don't hear what someone is saying, it's because we don't want to hear it. It's called selective hearing or selective listening. Whether it's ignoring emails, screening phone calls and texts, or simply putting headphones in and cutting ourselves off from the world. We all practice selective hearing, even when we know we shouldn't.

Unfortunately, it's not a new phenomenon. Israel, in Samuel's time, had a severe case of it. It wasn't that God wasn't speaking; they still had the Law given to Moses and the promises given to Abraham, but neither those tasked with preaching it nor those tasked with listening were doing their job. The problem started with Eli and his sons, the priests of the LORD (1 Samuel 1:3). Instead of preaching and teaching God's Word to the people of Israel, as they were called to do, his sons used their office to fatten their own bellies and satisfy their own fleshly desires (Leviticus 7:29-36; 1 Samuel 2:12-17, 22, 25).

What do you do when you're trying to talk to someone, and you can tell they're not listening? Today is Week #6 of the NFL game. How many times will you try to get the attention of a diehard football fan during a game before you give up? Parents, what do you do after the 9th and 10th times you've told your children to clean up their mess? Often, when we know someone is not listening, we gradually refuse to speak, don't we?

And that's how God decided to treat Israel. They had stopped listening, so God stopped speaking. That's what it means when it says, in 1 Samuel 3:1, "in those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions." God was giving Israel the silent treatment. God wanted to speak to His people, to lead them, discipline them, forgive them, and comfort them. But because they refused to listen, God stopped speaking. It was the worst judgment possible.

Do we have a listening problem? Do we deserve the silent treatment from God? I feel that we do. And yet, even though we deserve the silent treatment, God, in His grace, continues to speak. Thanks be to God! He has not taken His Word from our homes, from our church, and from our country yet. In fact, it's just the opposite. He speaks to us in more places and ways than ever before. God is infinitely more patient with our "deafness" than we are with one another. Despite our selective listening and disobedience, God continues to speak to us for only one reason: GRACE that is rooted in Jesus Christ, who listened and obeyed God fully even to give up His own life.

Samuel, the listener of God, shows us today that we can prevent falling hard in life by listening to God. God who spoke in the past speaks to us today through the Holy Scripture, through His Son Jesus Christ, through nature and God's creation, through other believers, through music, through circumstances, through His Spirit, through prayer, and many other ways. Are we listening? I pray that we are. Amen.