

SERMON

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Well these are amazing passages aren't they? And such a treat for us to spend a bit of time considering them this Epiphany or this time when we remember the revelation, the manifestation of Christ. And that's what we hope for and pray for each time we open the Bible, as we read the words contained in it. We want not just information, although that is good of course, but we want transformation of our hearts and minds and our lives, through the manifestation of Christ.

So I'd invite you to pull open a bible, maybe want to use an analogue version, a hard copy, paper version or you might want to go digital and you can look at a bible app or look at a website. Bible Gateway is a great website to look at to access scripture and the words contained in the Bible. We're going to focus in on, in the next few minutes, in the Old Testament reading. Especially as we look at this encounter that the young prophet Samuel has with God.

And it's sometimes hard for us to just sort of parachute into a passage like this, it's hard to sort of get your bearings. But I wanted to give you maybe a little bit of a framework, so you can get your orientation and get your bearings. Because this book was written about 900 years BC, before Christ and it begins with the birth of Samuel. You may remember the story. Hannah, Samuel's mother, wasn't able to conceive. She calls out to God, asks for a child, asks for a son and God answers her prayer and gives her Samuel, she gives birth to Samuel. Samuel is then dedicated to God by Hannah, by his mother and that's why he's growing up in the temple, under the leadership of Eli. Samuel then becomes a highly respected leader and priest and prophet, who anoints the first of the Israelite kings.

And this book is packed full of great things. Some of the accounts and stories, not so well known, others, more known, like the account of David and Goliath, all contained within one Samuel. And the purpose of one Samuel and two Samuel and actually Kings and Judges and Joshua together as a set, really are to show God revealing himself in the midst of human sinfulness, and points to God's plans for sending a messiah, who would bring hope and life to the world.

Anyway, hope that gives you a bit of an orientation. So let's dive straight into our passage, one Samuel chapter three. And we come straight to this account with Samuel, who's name means 'heard of God'. And hearing God's voice is exactly what he is doing, which is what he didn't realise was happening. He thought that Eli was speaking to him and actually God was speaking to him. He later discovers that God is calling him by name, and this is the moment where God called Samuel into his role as prophet, priest and leader. And what I particularly want to hone in on, is verse seven and this is what it says in verse seven: 'Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him'. Samuel did not yet know the Lord and I find that totally fascinating.

This boy who'd been dedicated to God, who was growing up in the temple, who was being mentored by the high priest Eli, who was sleeping in the temple, by the Ark of the Covenant in the temple, with a name like 'heard of God'. He did not know the Lord, and I find that so interesting because we can know a lot about God, you can have degrees in God, you can grow up as a Christian, you can have a lot of information about God, your dad can be a vicar, as mine was, but we may not know God. And at this moment, God is revealing himself to Samuel, he's beginning to speak to him.

Samuel is experiencing God in his life. He's beginning to know God. And that word 'know' is an interesting one, it is used in many places. I think of John 10 as an example. Jesus, he's saying to those around him, he says, 'I am the good shepherd, I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Just as the father knows me and I know the father.' And that word 'know' means knowledge through experience. It's not just an accumulation of facts but it involves experiential knowledge.

It speaks of an intimacy of relationship. And Samuel in this passage, experiences God. We can experience God in our lives too. Lots of world religions are about what we can do to get to God and experience God but the Christian faith is all about what God has done to draw near to us, to come near to mankind, so that we can get to know him. Just as God has revealed himself to Samuel on that very night, he ultimately reveals himself to the world, through his Son Jesus Christ. Everything that God wanted to say to the world, he says through the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus on that cross, he stretches out his hand and in his body, he's bringing us close to God. Doesn't matter where you've been or what you've done or what hell or dark place you find yourself in, there's nowhere that God cannot find you, there's nowhere where God cannot shine his love into your heart and give you an experience of forgiveness and freedom.

In Christ, nothing can separate us from the love of God. This is the Good News. Samuel heard God's voice, we too can experience the presence and reality of God in our lives as well. So what do we need to do? Well the first thing is come expectant. Come expectant, turn your hearts towards God. Be ready to hear him speak to you. Samuel didn't expect God to speak to him, so he didn't know it was God when he showed up.

But what about next time that you open your Bible and you read some verses or you pray. Come with a posture of listening. Next time you tune into a Sunday service online or you in some way engage and turn your hearts to God. Have a journal, maybe a piece of paper and a pen, write down some things that maybe have resonated with you, maybe a verse or a word from scripture that has impacted you in some way or just landed in some way. Have a regular reading plan of the bible, so that you're reading the bible regularly, not just sort of dipping into it.

But by the spirit of God, this is his primary way of speaking to us, through his word, to encourage us, to comfort us and to challenge but also to bring life. And encourage you, why not start with Mark's Gospel, the shortest of the gospels and why don't you just dedicate yourself over the next few weeks, to see whether you can read a chapter a day or just start reading through Mark's Gospel and listen out to what God might be saying to you.

Come expectant, that's the first thing. Second thing, come in humility. Verse nine in one Samuel three says this, 'speak lord for your servant is listening'. Are we prepared to hear God's voice? Maybe through the poor, through our enemies, through our neighbours. Nathaniel in the New Testament reading, he didn't expect anything good to come out of Nazareth. In the same way, watch out for God's voice in unexpected places.

Don't think because you are too young or too old or not academic or don't work for the Church or not ordained, that it means God doesn't want to reveal himself to you. Put aside your qualifications or lack of, that you think you may have. God wants to speak to you, God wants to show himself to you through Jesus. Come in repentance, come in humility, come in faith, trusting that Jesus has good things in store for you. As we do that, anything is possible because he wants to bring not just information but transformation of our hearts, minds and lives, through the manifestation of Christ.