

Last week we heard about the early days of the wilderness years, when Moses had to contend with the people complaining about nothing to eat. Today's reading takes us generations ahead, to the time when the 40 years' wandering had ended and the people have settled down in Canaan. Moses is long gone, and the governing structure is a loose series of military leaders who function also as elders—the judges. The Temple will not be built for several more generations, so the Ark of the Covenant, which had been carried wherever the people went during their time in the wilderness, is now kept in a structure called a temple, a less formal and more temporary structure, in a place called Shiloh. The Ark of the Covenant contained various sacred objects like Aaron's staff and the tablets on which were inscribed the commandments of God. So the word of the Lord was physically present in that temple in Shiloh, but as the story tells us, "the word of the Lord was rare in those days": people were not in touch with God, not hearing from God. "Visions," it says, "were not widespread."

Even the institutional keepers of the sacred place had lost touch with God. The sons of the old priest, Eli, are corrupt. They embezzle from the treasury, they eat the parts of the sacrifices that are meant for God, and they sleep with the women who come to the temple. Eli himself has lost his eyesight, perhaps in more ways than one. And yet when the child Samuel is awakened at night by the voice of God, it's Eli who realizes what's going on and prompts Samuel to respond, to listen, and to carry the message, which is bad news for him, Eli. So Eli interests me.

Here is a man who has been at his job for a long time, a lifetime. However much fervor he may once have had, it has withered away and he has just been going

through the motions for years. He reminds me of the hazard for modern pastors, who work so hard in their 30s and 40s that they neglect their families, their marriages fall apart and their children act out and self-sabotage, and in their 50s and 60s these pastors become bitter or apathetic or addicted. It's a stereotype, but I've seen plenty of them in real life. Eli could be their patron saint.

But a little spark of the real priest still lives within him, and he recognizes who must be calling little Samuel and gives him instructions on how to hear what God has to say. Then, knowing that God has spoken to Samuel and not to him, Eli sets aside whatever defensiveness or resentment he might be feeling and presses Samuel to tell him truthfully what God told him, however painful it may be. You have to respect him for that.

Eli has not heard the word of the Lord, but he teaches Samuel how to listen for it. I am more and more interested in the skill of listening. It seems to require being able to not anticipate what the other may say. Actually holding a space open for what you do not know will fill it.

The brilliant interviewer, Krista Tippett, talks about "generous listening" in her new book, *Becoming Wise*. She's concerned about the degeneration of public discourse into stale debates in which nobody learns anything, and says that advocacy has value in civil society but can get in the way of the axial move of deciding to care about each other. Generous listening, she says, "is powered by curiosity, a virtue we can invite and nurture in ourselves . . . It involves a kind of vulnerability—a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. The listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the

other, and patiently summons one's own best self and one's own best words and questions." (p. 19)

Last week on Morning Edition Steve Inskeep interviewed Marc Maron, who's a former stand-up comic who now interviews people for a podcast he sends out of his garage. I've listened to him on and off, and what strikes me about him is that although he was always quick and funny, the longer he's done this interviewing gig, the more mentally healthy he seems to have become. That's entirely my perception; I haven't seen it asked or confirmed. But I bring it up because he's been something of a tormented soul, with unreliable and unstable parents, but he talks now about how he always loved to listen to conversations, since childhood, because it was how he caught clues about how to manage his life. Now he talks about being able to hold space for his interviewee to speak, and I think his skill at listening is healing for himself and perhaps others.

Samuel's story begins with his mother, Hannah, who could not conceive. When Eli saw her at the temple, weeping as she prayed, he thought she was drunk and scolded her. That reaction fits the image of a cynical old priest who's been going through the motions for years, dubious that God would ever really act or care, just putting in his hours and shuddering at the corruption of his sons, his successors. But Hannah did conceive, and when her baby was weaned, she brought him to the temple to serve God under the care of Eli. It's Eli, that withered old cynic, who teaches Samuel how to listen—how to keep space open for what has not yet been said, how to listen generously without assuming he already knows what he will hear. Perhaps the encounter with the weeping woman who called on God to hear

her turned him around. He had been wrong about her; maybe God did take an interest in human beings after all. So while he cared for Samuel and trained him for temple work, somehow he also reconsidered or reopened the possibility that God might speak. He guided Samuel to hear and respond to God even though he himself had never done so.

Richard Rohr says that spiritual growth comes from great pain and great love. I think Marc Maron's ability to pull great interviews out of people is because he listens so well, and that practice comes from long years of pain. I think Krista Tippett asks such good questions, and teaches us how to listen, because of great love—she finds beauty and wisdom in so many people I would never have known to listen to. This is a time when the absence or silence of God is keenly felt, but it may be because we are not taking listening seriously. It's easy to become as cynical as Eli was—but even Eli finally reawakened his soul and guided Samuel to hear God's voice. We need to study and learn from great listeners, so that we will be able to respond, "Speak, for your servant is listening," and move in the world in the way God calls us to move.

Let us pray.

Beckoning God,

In the stillness of the night you called Samuel into your service. Give us the ears to hear your many voices, so that when you call us into service, we may come gladly.

Amen.