

**Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> January**

**Epiphany 2**

**1 Samuel 3: 1 – 10; Psalm 139: 1 – 5, 12 – 17; John 1: 43 – 51**

**Expect! Listen! Respond!**

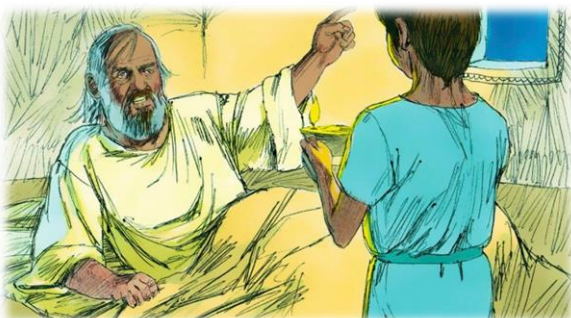
A year ago, almost nobody had heard of Zoom, nowadays even people who don't use the internet have probably heard the word and may even have some idea of that it is a means of communicating with several people at once. In those early days when people were still trying to work it all out there were lots of difficulties with sound. Had you muted yourself somehow? How did you unmute? Who was speaking? Why couldn't you see everyone? How could you tell if it was your turn to speak? As time passed, people became more familiar with the technology, some things evolved and became easier. For some, it became just another way of communicating, for others, it became something to ignore and continue communicating in ways that they were used to – using the phone; writing letters; using social media; even occasionally, face-to-face.



In today's Old Testament reading we see Samuel experiencing communication difficulties. He hears a voice but doesn't recognize it as God's voice, probably because he wasn't expecting it. We're told in the first verse

The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. (1 Sam 3 v 1b)

Eli, may have begun as a good priest but he has become lax in his service to God and appears to make no attempt to restrain his two sons in their corruption and defilement of their office. He has been warned in a prophecy (in chapter two) of the consequences of his and his son's behaviour. Whilst he may have taught Samuel the mechanics of serving



God as a priest, he appears to have neglected the spiritual side of service, of knowing God and recognising his voice. It may be that he has forgotten himself, because at first he doesn't seem to realise that it is God who is calling Samuel, it takes three calls before Eli

realises what is happening and tells Samuel how to respond. The rest of the chapter is taken up with a message from God for Eli which at first Samuel is reluctant to deliver but Eli, redeeming himself a little, encourages Samuel to speak.

Samuel goes on to become God's trusted leader of the people. He draws the people back to God, he reminds them of how they can recognise God's voice and communicate with him – although in the end they choose to go their own way and insist on having a king, but that's another story.

As a teacher I learnt that we all learn and communicate best in different ways. For some of you, reading this sermon is the way in which you best absorb its message, for some the pictures may enhance that, for others the pictures will make little difference. As Christopher's sermon last week demonstrated God can speak powerfully through artwork.

Others would perhaps prefer to hear it spoken because they remember the things they hear better than those that they read. Some like their information presented in charts or diagrams whilst others prefer to be active as they learn or communicate. Most of us have a preferred method but some of us use more than one method. At one church I knew a lady who brought her crochet to the service because it helped her to focus on what was being said, at first people thought she was being disrespectful but when she explained her reason they accepted it.

Psalm 139 reminds us how intimately God knows us

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. v1

(you) are acquainted with all my ways. v3

it was you who formed my inward parts; v13

God knows how to communicate with us but do we know how to hear him?

Do you expect God to communicate with you, or, like the people of Eli's time have you forgotten that he can?

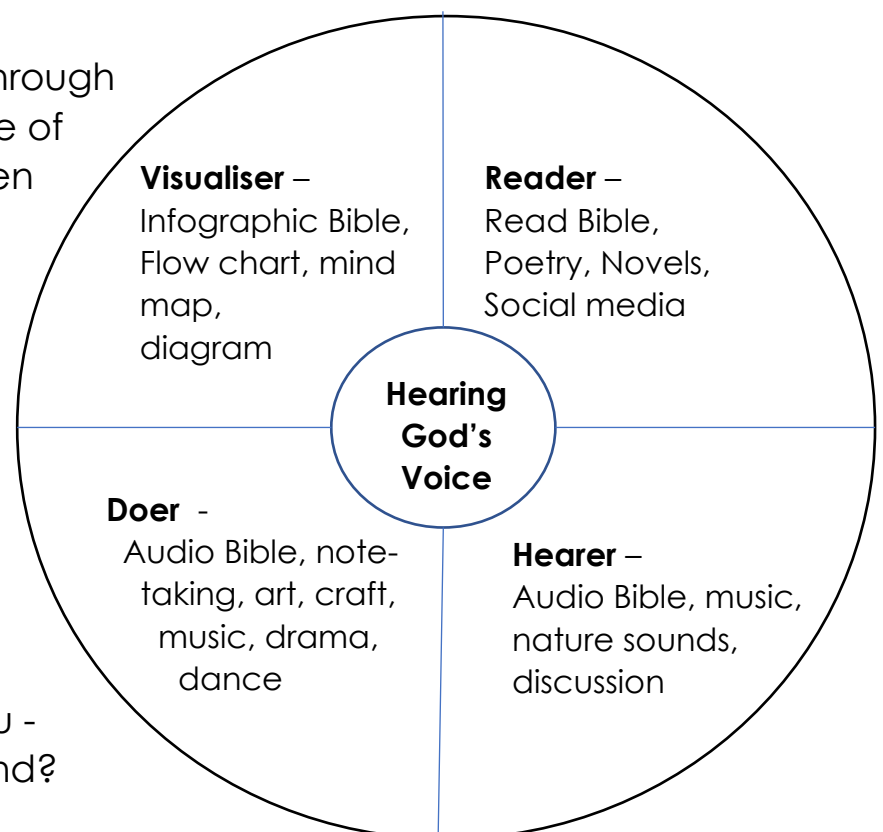
Do you give him the opportunity to communicate?

If the written word 'speaks' to you then simply reading your Bible may let you hear God's voice but look out for him in other words as well, a poem, a novel, a social media meme.

If you prefer the spoken word then perhaps invest in an audio version of the Bible but listen for God's voice in other ways too, a piece of music, the sounds of nature, a discussion – either one you listen to or one you are involved in.

People who need 'to do' might also invest in audio Bible so that they can listen whilst doing something else that doesn't require too much attention – doing the washing-up for instance, take notes during sermons, find creative ways to interpret scripture – art, craft, music, drama, dance – or look for God in those things. I once saw someone paint a picture during a sermon.

Those who prefer to 'hear' through visual means could make use of the Infographic Bible by Karen Sawrey.\* They might use a notepad to organise the information into a flow chart, a diagram or a mind map so that it makes sense to them. The last few paragraphs might be organised like this →



Having given God the opportunity to 'speak' to you - Do you listen? Do you respond?

Samuel listened and responded, when he was told what to do, then he listened to the message. It was a hard message that he had to pass on to Eli, it would have been difficult even for an adult used to hearing from God but this was a young boy hearing God for the first time. Nevertheless, he trusted God and with some encouragement from Eli he spoke the words God had given to him. Are you ready to hear and respond to a hard message from God? Sometimes they are necessary to help us grow and move on in our relationship with God.

It's not always a hard message though, sometimes the message is as simple as 'Follow me'. In the reading from John's gospel we hear of two people who respond immediately to Jesus when he calls them. First Philip,

who then goes off to bring Nathanael to meet Jesus. Nathanael, at first sceptical, barely sees Jesus before he recognises him

...you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jn 1 v 49

Both are young men who become part of the twelve closest followers of Jesus. Listening to and responding to God can lead us on some interesting journeys but he will always go with us. When I was pondering whether my call to Reader ministry was real or just me wanting to do something different, God spoke to me in three different ways; through a Bible verse; through some words spoken in a sermon; through a dream. Those confirmations of my calling were the things I held onto when the training got difficult.

Just as using Zoom gets easier when you use it often so tuning in to what God is saying to you becomes easier the more you practice it. Think about how you find it easiest to communicate and try listening for God. Maybe when we are able to return to church some of you will be brave enough to bring your crochet, your note-pad or your sketch pad.

Helen Evans

\*The Infographic Bible uses diagrams and charts to visualise the story of the Bible. I have a copy if you're interested and would like to see it. You can buy it online through the new [uk.bookshop.org](http://uk.bookshop.org) platform which supports small independent bookshops including the Designs Gallery in Castle Douglas, this is the link [The Infographic Bible \(bookshop.org\)](http://uk.bookshop.org)

You can see pictures of what it contains at the Amazon link [The Infographic Bible: Visualising the Drama of God's Word: Amazon.co.uk: Karen Sawrey: 9780007554614: Kindle Store](http://Amazon.co.uk)