I recently came across a pastor on the internet telling his congregation that God had put it on his heart to change their church’s website. Now, I don’t know with any certainty what sorts of opinions God has about websites, but I was a little skeptical of this pastor’s claim. It sounded to me like he wanted to change the website and to strengthen his argument he claimed it was all God’s idea. When couched in such terms it is hard to argue with because no one wants to get smited for having the wrong views on the proper location of the navigation bar. But how do we know if this guy was really telling the truth? Well, when presented with such questions about God’s will and God’s interaction with humanity it is good to look at the Bible and read what it has to say on the subject. And fortunately, today’s Old Testament lesson is very helpful in examining the questions of how do we know if God is speaking to others and by extension how do we know if God is speaking to us.

If you recall, in our Old Testament lesson Samuel is lying in his room when he hears someone calling, “Samuel, Samuel.” He assumes this call is coming from his mentor Eli and so goes to him. Eli tells him it was not him and to go lie down again. This happens again and when it happens a third time Eli realizes what is going on and tells Samuel to, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” Samuel complies with Eli’s instructions and does indeed hear from God. God’s message does not concern websites but is instead about the punishing of Eli’s house. It is not a particularly cheery message unless you are into that sort of thing. But rather than focusing on the message I want to examine the process by which Samuel heard from God and see what we can learn. Before we proceed though I want to point out that this story does not contain everything we need to know about the subject of hearing from God, but it is still useful and worth examining. So with that being said let’s take a closer look.

The first thing we learn is that the person hearing from God may have no idea that they are hearing from God. Upon hearing his name being called Samuel makes the somewhat logical assumption that it must be coming from the only other human in the vicinity. What this tends to tell me is that hearing from God is not a very common occurrence. Samuel was something of an apprentice to Eli and Eli was a priest descended from Aaron. So, Samuel was in a place where it would not necessarily be weird to hear from God, but as we saw it was not his first thought, it was quite unexpected. So, at least in this case, it is safe to assume that hearing from God can be a fairly rare thing. And in my experience, this is true. God is not there giving advice on every coming and going of our lives. This does not mean that God is not involved in our lives, nor that He is uninterested, but simply that He can be like Calvin Coolidge and speak only when needed; meaning, He may not give us advice on how to organize our sock drawer or if we should to take the unders on today’s Packer game.

Now on to point number two, which concerns the involvement of others when hearing from God. Samuel is the one who heard from God, but it was only under the guidance of Eli that he realized what was really going on. I think this is something very important to remember. Most religious endeavors go off the rail when the leader starts hearing from God and do not bother checking with anyone else. From Jan van Leiden to David Koresh, history is filled with narcissists and nut-cases who claim a direct line with God. They never check with anyone else, probably because they do not want to hear that their will and God’s will are not the same thing. But to my mind checking with others is a very important step in hearing from God. Because when we think we have heard from God we need to be humble and consult with others about what we have heard so that we may discern if it was really God speaking or maybe just some bad clams.

And now onto the third thing we see in this story concerning hearing from God and for that we need to focus on what Samuel actually heard from God. And what he heard was that God was “about to punish [Eli’s] house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.” Summing up this message, something really bad is about to happen to Eli and his family. Now I do not think we can look at this and say that every time we hear from God it means that something awful is about to happen, but it does suggest that not every message from God is going to be a good one. What this tells me is not that we should always expect bad news, but it is a warning that if we constantly hear God telling us we are wonderful and affirming all our decisions, we may not be hearing from God but rather might be hearing from ourselves. And this can be a real temptation. We can be tempted to think that everything we want to do comes with God’s seal of approval. Or think about it like this. Let us say that next week I showed up and said I wanted to put up a big screen in front of the church and a Del Taco in the back. You would probably laugh at me and would be right to do so. But what if I said the same thing but added that God had put it on my heart to do this you might have a slightly different reaction because you do not want to go against the will of God. It really changes the dynamic and that is why clergy need to be very careful and very sure before they play the God card because it can be used as a tool for manipulation. Just like my example at the beginning where God had very specific instructions about a website. For as we just heard God may tell us things that we do not want to hear.

In recapping what we discussed today, remember that I am not saying that people never hear from God; I believe I have heard from Him a few times. My point simply is that from what we see today it may be different from what we expect. In much of the church these days hearing from God is as common as brushing our teeth. The idea can be invoked in the most trivial of matters. But today’s story of Samuel suggests that that hearing from God is rare, it is done in the context of a community and we may not hear a great message. That does not mean that it will always happen this way but it does mean that it will sometimes happen this way. In this story we see that it takes a while to understand what is happening and when it does Eli would probably have preferred if God had never spoken to Samuel. And so today’s ending might be a little depressing not just because we might hear things from God that we do not necessarily want to hear. But also because we need to be very careful when we say God told us this or that because if we are wrong, we are attributing something to God that is not His. And that is a sin. God may speak to us or He may not. But whatever the case, we have the Bible and the Church so we are not lacking in the knowledge of what God asks of us through which we may be His this day and forevermore.