I did a wedding a few years ago in downtown Louisville. It was during the time that one of the bridges was closed and before the new bridges had been built, what local residents called “the Dark Ages.” To make sure I didn’t get caught in rush-hour bridge traffic I arrived a couple hours early. I had some time to kill, so I headed over to the Louisville Slugger museum. I’m a huge baseball fan but have had never been to the museum before, so I was excited to see it in person. It was a spiritual experience for me. I slowly moved around this baseball sanctuary in hushed reverence as I looked at the memorabilia from some of the game’s most legendary players.

And then I heard it. “Kory.” Plain as day. I got goosebumps! It was a real “Field of Dreams” moment for me. I thought at first that maybe I was imagining it, but then I heard it again. “Kory.” It was a loud whisper, but had a divine force behind it. I remember this story about Samuel, so I responded very quietly, “Yes, Lord?” And the voice said, “Kory…get your hands off the display case!” I said, “Lord, my hands aren’t on the display case!” That’s when I realized that the voice came from a parent whose child – named Kory – was standing right behind me, drooling on one of the exhibits.

Have you ever had that happen to you? Have you ever heard your name being called, only to realize it wasn’t really you that was being called? Or on the flipside, have you ever NOT heard your name when it WAS being called? I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been waiting for a table at a restaurant, and I’m so spaced out that they have to call my name three times – “table for Wilkerson….table for Wilkinson…table for Wilcoxson!” – before I realize they are talking to me.

Think about all the times our names are called during the course of a week. Our names are called at restaurants, at doctors’ offices, by our co-workers or students. We hear our names from friends, from family, from telemarketers, from Starbucks baristas. We see our names written on junk mail, on text messages, on Post-It notes. We can relate to the disciples’ plea to Jesus in our first scripture – “Everyone is looking for you!” If that feels like the case for us, then how do we distinguish God’s voice from all the other voices calling our name?

We continue our sermon series this week called “Overwhelmed,” in which we are seeking to learn how we can balance the busyness and demands of our lives with God’s call to us to be still, be present, pay attention. How do we find the time and mental capacity to listen to God when our ears are filled with so many other noises?

Our guide for today will be Samuel. Samuel will grow up to the Israel’s last judge and the person who anoints its first king, Saul. But before all of that, he was a young lad growing up in the local temple. Samuel’s mother Hannah promised that if God ended her barrenness and gave her a son, she would give him back to God. So as soon as he was weaned, Samuel was taken to the temple and left with Eli, the temple priest, who raised the boy to follow in his line of work.

In our passage today, Eli has grown old and weak, and the time has come for Samuel to hear God’s call and for him to assume his role in the priestly vocation. Except for one problem: there’s a disconnect between the transmitter and the receiver. If you’re trying to use a GPS around a lot of tall buildings or talk on a cell phone in the mountains, you know what I’m talking about. For communication to work, you have to have someone who’s sending the message and
someone on the other end who’s receiving it. In the story, the message is sent by God but not received by Samuel.

Instead, Samuel thinks Eli is calling him, so we have this Laurel and Hardy routine where Samuel is called by God three times and all three times he goes to Samuel and says, “Here I am!” After the third time, Eli figures out what’s going on and instructs Samuel to pay attention to the source of the signal: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Here’s my question: Why didn’t Samuel recognize God’s voice? Surely when God speaks it has a certainly Godly quality to it that distinguishes it from other voices, right? Like the James Earl Jones mixed with Yoda mixed with my grandmother. Or maybe not. Maybe the issue is that when God speaks, we don’t recognize God’s voice because we don’t know God. After the second time God calls to Samuel, we’re told, “Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.”

Wouldn’t it be nice if God spoke through burning bushes and pillars of fire these days? It sure would make our lives a whole lot easier. Remember the billboard ad campaigns a few years ago that had statements from God like, “Don’t make me come down there!” and “Let’s meet at my house Sunday before the game”? That’s how I want God to speak to me. But if we have to be slapped upside the head with a billboard in order to hear God’s voice, we may not be listening correctly.

In order to distinguish someone’s voice, you have to know them, to have a relationship with them. Before we opened our new wing a few weeks ago, our nursery was in the Mission Center near our adult Sunday School classes. In our Sunday school class for parents of young kids, we’d be in the middle of a discussion, and off in the distance we’d hear a baby’s cry, and all the moms would poke their head up like a deer who just heard a tree branch snap. And they’d look at each other and say, “Was that yours? I think it was mine. Was that mine?” They know the voice of their kids because they have a relationship with them.

As Samuel shows us, building that relationship and growing in our recognition of God’s voice is not a linear process. That’s especially true in our crazy busy lives when we barely have time for flesh-and-blood relationships, not to mention our relationship with God. Samuel moves from misunderstanding (“Yes, Eli?”) to recognition (“Oh, that wasn’t you?”) to response (“Speak, Lord”). Our journeys in faith aren’t marked by consistent steps forward, but are more like staggerers, a step backward, two steps forward, a step off to the side. For many of us, we have to work our way through responses like “That can’t be God talking” and “Could that be God talking?” before we can get to, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

And even when we do believe God is calling us, that doesn’t mean we always understand what God is saying. I may have told you before that I had a seminary colleague who was talking in our theology class about God’s call and how when God was truly calling him to do something he felt this restless movement deep down inside of him. And our crotchety theology professor peered over his glasses and said, “How do you know it’s not gas?” How do we know? How do we hear God’s voice in the midst of all the other voices calling our names?

There are two things Samuel did that are instructive. First, he asked for help. He went to Eli, who eventually helped Samuel recognize the voice that was calling his name. Samuel reached out to someone who could help him discern God’s voice. For me, that’s how it’s worked. I’ve never heard God speak to me through a blinding light or a flashing neon sign. It’s been through other people, people who were infinitely wiser and more attuned than me, people who said, “God is trying to say something to you. Are you listening?”
I think a key for our spiritual growth is to be in conversation with someone specifically about our faith. That’s not easy, I know. A lot of us feel embarrassed or guilty that we’re not spiritual enough or don’t know the Bible well enough or aren’t committed enough. Guess what? Just about everyone feels that way. Everyone struggles. Everyone doubts. And we grow stronger when we share these things together. Who’s someone you could invite to coffee and talk with about your faith journey? Who’s someone to whom you could give the authority to say to you, “This may be God speaking”?

The other thing Samuel did to hear God’s voice was to create a space for listening. Once Eli told him to pay attention, Samuel turned off his white noise machine, silenced his cell phone, put his clock radio on mute, and listened. Do you ever have time to do that? Do you ever sit in silence and just listen, or read scripture without distractions? Author Eric Sandras gives this advice: “In the morning, or in the evening, take five minutes and refuse to turn on any noise-making device (that can include family members). The regular exercise of silence can flush our minds clean of unwanted noise,” which then makes space for God to speak. Author Tricia Rhodes calls this spiritual breathing. Mentally inhale the reality of God’s presence and exhale the noisy clamor inside of us. Inhale the peace of Christ and exhale the anxiety of the day. Just sit. Just be. Breathe. Listen. Be still. Look, the noise will still be waiting for you when you’re done. Everyone will still be looking for you. I promise. But for just a few moments, ground yourself in the reality that before you were even given a name for people to call, you were loved by God, who called you “Child.”

I’ve had many conversations with people who have yearned for God to speak to them. “If I only knew what God wanted me to do!” I don’t believe God pops in and out of our lives to give us messages, like some divine pizza delivery person. I believe God is ALWAYS with us, ALWAYS speaking to us, ALWAYS guiding us. Through scripture. Through silence. Through other people. Through voices at baseball museums? OK, maybe not. The issue is not if God is speaking; the issue is if we are listening. There’s a lot of noise out there, a lot of people calling your name. But only one of them is God. Are we listening?