

**GO BACK TO SLEEP?
I Samuel 3:1-20
January 15, 2012**

Last week when we ordained elders and deacons, we sang an appropriate hymn, “Here I Am Lord.” It was expressive of the officer’s call and commitment. I offer myself to You and Your service. The hymn would be equally appropriate for today’s Scripture lesson about God’s call to a young boy serving in the Temple. “Here I am Lord . . . Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night . . .”

The call comes in an ominous context, one that could well be descriptive of our own day. “. . . word from the Lord was rare in those days, visions were infrequent.” It has an arrestingly modern note. The question that occurs to me is, “Was/is there no word from the Lord?” because God stopped speaking . . . or people stopped listening? In a New York Times article Yvonne Manking shared with me last week entitled, “The Joy of Quiet.” I read, “The average American spends 8½ hours a day in front of a screen. The average American teenager sends or receives 75 text messages in a day, though one girl in Sacramento managed to handle an average of 10,000 every 24 hours for a month.”¹ Who has that much to say? And how can we possibly process that much input? “We have more and more ways to communicate, as Thoreau noted, but less and less to say. Partly because we’re so busy ‘communicating.’ And, as

he might also have said – we’re rushing to meet so many deadlines that we hardly register that what we need most are lifelines.”² Incidentally, there is one answer you might want to consider – you can pay \$2,285 a night to stay in a cliff top room . . . in Big Sur where there is no TV in the room; the future of travel, the author states, lies in “black-hole resorts,” which charge high prices precisely because you can’t get online in their rooms. “Has it really come to this?” The author concludes.

We are lashed with skittering bits and bytes, streaming audio multi-tasking, multiple deadlines, beeps and squawks, it’s no wonder we want to scream – “Stop the world; I want to get off!” Where’s the off button? Only it would make many extremely anxious if it were pushed. The silence can be deafening.

Recall these words of T. S. Eliot:

Where will the voice resound,

Where will God be found?

Not here, there is not enough silence.

Could there be something prophetic in this assessment? I suppose such thoughts will classify me as an old fuddy-duddy, a techno-dinosaur. Actually I just bought a new laptop and I got an updated smart phone . . . and eventually I’m gonna’ learn how to use them.

In Eli’s day, things were corrupt. He was old and tired and his eyesight dimmed. He was going through the

motions as a priest. His own sons were priests, profiteers and philanderers. Like many parents, he had failed to impart the significance and holiness of the religious vocation and now they were out of control. I couldn’t help thinking of the “whiskey priest” in Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*. Despite his flaws and failures, he can still recognize Gods word and does Gods work in spite of his shortcomings. “. . . and the lamp of God had not yet gone out.” It was a key phrase then and now.

There was this child Samuel who in effect was part of the remaining light. Oh if his own sons had a fraction of the character Eli saw in him. But, it’s too late for this old man, he thought to himself. Too late.

And then one night, after the routine tasks of Temple maintenance completed and the functionaries had settled down for the evening, amidst the slow, steady breathing and snoring, Samuel is awaked by a voice calling his name. Assuming the natural explanation the boy obediently goes to Eli – “Here I am for you called me.” Eli’s response carries more meaning than a simple directive. The priest gives this follower, and by extension the church, a reply consistent with his weariness, his disappointment and lost hope: “Go back to sleep. Return to unconsciousness, passivity . . . don’t expect much of anything. Just keep on keeping on . . . it’s not ‘don’t ask questions’ . . . it’s ‘what’s the use?’” But the boy hears it again and the scene is repeated. This time, perhaps with a little edge in his voice. Now Samuel is

probably 12 years old, a child marked from birth for a special destiny, but he’s not aware yet . . . aware of the personal reality of God. A third time the boy hears his name and goes to Eli who this time gets it. Can it be in this corrupt, skeptical age of decline, God would speak . . . to a boy?! “Go lie back down Samuel and if the Voice calls to you again say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

And so he did. And the voice came again. And Samuel did as he was instructed. And God spoke.

“I am about to do something so definite, dramatic and direct that both ears will tingle.” In effect it’s time to “clean house” and renew Israel’s commitment to their God. Eli’s boys are done and gone and you Samuel will be my priest and prophet.

The story, at least this part, comes to an end with Eli insisting that Samuel tell him the substance of the Lord’s message. To his credit he submits and accepts the pronouncement against his sons and his family.

Just suppose you could set aside your natural or programmed skepticism for a moment. Just suppose, if you have difficulty with this notion, you accepted the proposition God still speaks. How would such a story as this inform and guide our ability to hear that voice?

Here we see the voice comes to one who has not grown jaded; who is open and receptive. He’s young and his filters against such things are not as

¹ N.Y. Times, Sunday Review, Jan 1, p 6

² ibid

sophisticated or refined. I'm reminded of the child who was busy with pencil and paper. "What are you drawing, dear," her mother asked. "God" was the child's reply. "But dear," said the mother. "Nobody knows what God looks like." But the child confidently replied, "They will when I've finished this."

Samuel heard the voice (after a few tries) that pronounced judgment and called him to a new vocation. Are we listening?

When the King of France said to Joan of Arc: "Oh, your voices! Your voices! Why don't I hear any voices?" and the condemned young woman said, "You would, if you listened."

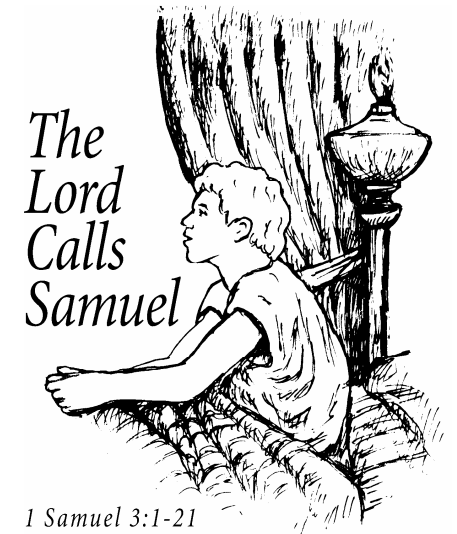
Let me qualify something as I anticipate a response. "Do you mean to say, if I were receptive enough I would hear voices, audible voices?" No, not audible, though I have heard some credible sources say a voice was audibly heard. Rather, I think one may hear in other ways. A quickening in one's spirit. A conviction that a scripture passage was meant for them; a word spoken by a counselor, a friend, why even something in a sermon. God's voice is not easily heard. It's a still, small voice. It will not try to overpower us nor shout down other voices. People begin to listen when they think, when they reach with their whole body, mind and soul. To hear the soft voice of God in a little child, or that awesome word of God in circumstance, or that beautiful voice of God in love, or that comforting word of God in pain, or meet that word become flesh in Christ, requires nothing less than one's attention. Some

with experience call receptivity a matter first of emptying oneself. He who has ears to hear, let him hear, saith the spirit. Or, as another source has said, "When the student is ready, then the master will appear." And what amazing things are unveiled.

Add to an attitude of receptivity, the fact in the story that the voice came in the night when there was quietness; that emptying idea again. There was space and enough silence for the voice to be heard. In the normal daily routines, the clamor and din about us makes it hard to hear. To hear we might have to turn off our computers, cell phones and TV's and attune to the divine frequency.

Emptying. Receptivity. Quietness. And another element. Samuel goes to Eli. Sometimes the voice is heard but with a hearing aid, the assistance of another. Another person who can help us discern the voice. For all his faults and failures, it took the wisdom of Eli to make sense of the voice he heard; there was no going back once he heard, and now that word would alter the course of his young life forever.

God still calls and to those who listen, there is a role to be played, a task to be done, a destiny to be enacted. Incidentally, the name Samuel means God has heard. Here I am, Lord.



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