

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his 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."

Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.

When you imagine the voice of God speaking, what does it sound like to you? Do you hear James Earl Jones or is it more like Morgan Freeman? Or maybe you are like the people in a recent study by Stanford anthropology professor, T.M. Lurhmann. At least 10 percent of the people she interviewed

said that they had heard a voice when they were alone or had seen something no one else saw.

Most of those folks said that God came to them through images during prayer or in a quiet voice they hear inside their minds like the “sound of a slender silence” that Elijah heard. Some hear God in the voices of other people or in the natural world, and some people even reported sensory experiences of God, like a touch on the shoulder. When Lurhmann asked about unusual perceptual experiences that happened between waking and sleeping, the number jumped to 40 percent.

The transitional spaces between states of consciousness – between dreaming, sleeping and waking – seems to be a common opening for God to speak with us. That’s where God and God’s messengers most often interact with me. I had an encounter with St. Benedict one night that moved me toward formal discernment for holy orders; an encounter that was startling and persuasive, and also deeply reassuring.

And so, I empathize with young Samuel. That being said, his story is, in many ways, quite different than my own.

Samuel was born a miracle baby to Hannah. Just as God did for Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and for our own St. Elizabeth, God gave Hannah a baby chosen for a special purpose. She and everyone else thought that she would never have children until she went to the temple at Shiloh, deeply distressed, and presented herself to God. She promised to give the child back to God.

Eli, the Aaronite high priest, saw Hanna praying in silence and blessed her prayer. Hannah gave birth to Samuel, and as soon as the boy was weaned, she brought him back to Eli. And so, Samuel grew up serving the old man at the temple at Shiloh, which was the major worship center for the Israelites before they built the first Temple in Jerusalem.

By the time of our reading, young Samuel is about twelve and the ancient world is in turmoil. The Israelites are divided by tribes and life is out of control because, according to the last line of the book of Judges, “in those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased.”

Visions are no longer spread about. Priests are performing the sacrificial rituals, but these rarely provoke divine encounters. Religious life has become hollow. The self-serving priests of the house of Eli have been taking the choice portions the sacrificial meat for themselves; a sacrilege.

The times are as dark as the night that opens our story.

The earthenware oil lamp in the sanctuary has not yet gone out. Dawn is near. The room stinks of blood and burned fat that the incense can no

longer disguise. Samuel is laying by the ark of God, the fabled throne of the unseen YHWH that Israel carried into battle to inspire her armies. Inside the ark are sacred relics: a pot of manna, Aaron's budded rod and the tablets of the covenant.

Laying there beside to the ark, the very symbol of God's presence, Samuel hears a voice. Whether it is more like a "sound of a slender silence" or a full voice, the boy responds. Thinking that Eli has called him, Samuel calls from the inner chamber of the sanctuary to Eli in the outer room, "Here I am." Twice this happens, and each time, the blind old priest sends him back to bed.

Samuel had not yet met the word of YHWH, and the word had become so rare, that even Eli did not recognize the revelation of this now unfamiliar phenomenon. Until Samuel wakes him a third time.

And now, the old priest remembers. He wakes up just enough to recall how to be present to that voice: "Go lie down. If you are called again, say 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening'."

And, sure enough, YHWH came and stood poised and called again.

Now, the lectionary allows us to stop the story right there. And that might leave us imagining that what God said there in the dark to this innocent and obedient young boy was something warm and comforting.

That isn't what God said at all.

Instead, God describes bringing dreadful calamities to Israel and the house of Eli. God's first message to Samuel is a divine revelation of a different kind of turbulence for the lives of the Israelites. In time, God will make it clear that, as the human face of these changes, Samuel's words will not fall to the ground. From Dan in the far north to Beersheba in the south, all Israel will come to recognize Samuel's reliability as a prophet.

We learn from Samuel's story that listening to God does not always bring comfort. Whether God sounds like Cate Blanchett or a breeze through the trees, God comes for us with a word that has become rare in our consciousness or in the world around us.

When the world needs soothing, God raises up people who can heal and comfort. And when the world needs prophets, God raises up people who can challenge. And God raises them all in the presence of people who can teach and support them.

Remember that.

God's persistence and Eli's mentoring worked hand in hand. We learn how to discern God's voice in the company of people who have gone before us. They help attune our ears and hearts to God. They teach us to hear what

the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman called “the sound of the genuine” that flows through all people.

There was another prophet woken up in the middle of the night. On the night of January 27th, 1956, during the Montgomery bus boycott, a threatening phone-call got the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. out of bed. The call terrified him about what might happen to his dedicated wife and his new-born baby daughter. Dr. King found himself sitting in the kitchen ready to give up. He put his head in his hands and prayed out loud, offering God his weakness and his fear. And in the darkness of night, God answered.

Dr. King said it seemed as though he could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world.”

And then, Dr. King said, “I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.” Three nights later, Dr. King’s house was bombed. Twelve years later, he was assassinated.

And now, nearly fifty years later, the word of God that Dr. King gave us is once again becoming rare in our consciousness and in our behaviors. And the only way that we will hear it or remember how to respond is to be as open and obedient as Samuel, trusting God to give us words that will not fall to the ground.

Lutheran theologian, Paul Tillich, was lecturing in Chicago when a student approached him, bible in hand. “Dr. Tillich,” the student said, “do you or do you not believe that this Bible is the holy word of God?” Tillich answered: “Yes, if *it* grasps *you*. No, if *you* grasp *it*.”

God’s call to prophecy, you see, is not an answer printed on a page nor summons for the faint of heart. The holy and *living* word of God may come to grasp any one of us and draw us into a storm that we don’t feel ready or qualified to engage. To become trustworthy in our calls means that we nurture our ability to hear and trust God in the community of faith.

You and I are surrounded by people who have come before us. They help attune our ears and hearts, and together with Dr. King we can answer a call to action that is about bettering the human condition by standing up for the dignity of every human being and every human society.

Just know this: God is still speaking. God’s word, whatever that may be for each of us, is once being uttered into the darkness of a night when people are withdrawing into tribes and there is no king.

The lamp of God has not yet gone out.

God is still speaking the sound of the genuine into you and to me, while people and the truth suffer because of divisiveness and ignorance, hatred and apathy.

We can make the lamp of God burn bright again.

God is still speaking a summons to prophecy; holy and living words that support us and challenge us to manifest Christ in a world where God's truth and vision have become far too rare.

Even if the message is different for each of us, God is still speaking.

And so, if you hear someone call your name in the night, stir up your courage, open your mouth and say "Speak, O Holy One, for your servant is listening."

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