

**“The Word of the Lord is Very Rare Today ...
But it Can Be Heard if You Listen Real Hard”**

Sunday, June 3, 2018

I

The Word of the Lord is rare today ... at least some might say that. I mean, congressional greed and bickering...churches torn apart over everything from what you should think about sex and such, to what color the carpet should be ... war and terror and death all around ... innocents slaughtered before our very eyes. Oh, the Word of the Lord does seem rare indeed in our day!

Do you ever lie awake at night ... when the darkness makes benign things seem bad, and bad things seem much, much worse? Where you hear these voices in your head, voices that rarely have anything good to say to you? I mean at 4 in the morning, things I don't understand crowd in on me ... the meaning of life, of death, the fate of our world seemingly caught in a tightening vise of evil ... wondering where God is and what God thinks about the cruelty and the sheer stupidity of us humans ... what God thinks about the many mistakes I've also made.

A friend of mine said that at night when the brain panics, he's not sure what he's most afraid of ... that he'll hear a voice address him out of the silence ... or that he'll hear absolutely, definitively ... nothing at all.

Well, if you think your own bed's scary sometimes in the deep of the night, imagine poor Samuel sleeping in the temple next to the Ark of God. Just think of the terror he must have felt when he heard that mysterious voice ... that summons calling to him out of the deep dark.

II

Now backing up a little ... do you know Samuel's whole story? At least how it begins? See, he was born to Hannah, who thought she was barren. And so she prayed and prayed in the Temple of Shiloh for a son. And she promised this son to God if he were only born. Well, it turns out the old temple priest Eli overheard her prayer, and so he blessed her. And when Samuel was then born, Hannah kept her word to God and brought her baby to the Shiloh temple and left him there ... left him to serve the old priest Eli, now blind ... left Samuel to grow up tending the altar of God.

So Samuel spent his early years helping with Eli's priestly duties ... polishing the sacred bowls, scrubbing up the sacrificial blood from the temple floor, locking and unlocking the doors to the shrine ... a sort-of houseboy in the temple of God. And at night, Samuel would lie down by the Ark of God with the incense burning ... that incense not quite masking the horrible smell of the day's burnt offerings. ... Samuel

sleeping by a “powder keg” that could go off at any minute since that Ark was also the throne of the living God. But night after night Samuel lay down beside that altar, with the smell of burnt meat in his hair, trying to sleep lightly in case old Eli called him ... needed him in the night.

And then one night Someone does call out: “Samuel, Samuel.” He calls once and then again and again, and each time Samuel answers, “Here I am. Here I am.” And then he runs to Eli to find out why Eli’s calling. And each time – as we just heard – Eli sends him away, saying, “I did not call; go, lie down again.”

But by the third time Samuel runs into Eli’s room to answer his call, the old man begins to guess that someone really is calling Samuel; that it might not be a dream after all. “Someone is calling,” thinks Eli, “but who? Some ... He ... Someone.” So he says to Samuel, “If ‘He’ should call again, answer, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

And ‘course we know from our story this morning that that’s just what Samuel does. And you know something? Here’s the scary thing. ‘Cause it turns out that in that listening response, Samuel’s whole life turns. In fact, his whole life pivots on his response to that call: “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.” ‘Cause in that moment, Samuel becomes God’s servant ... no longer a houseboy in the temple, but a servant of God.

But now think about this. Maybe Samuel’s readiness to hear did have to take real courage. ‘Cause part of what he hears that night from out of the darkness are words that absolutely condemn old Eli and his whole household. See, Eli’s sons had become corrupt priests of the temple, stealing sacrificial meat ... carousing with women who came to the temple to pray. Oh, Eli had warned them and warned them, but Eli was weak – very weak – and now the bill had come due.

But now, you know, thinking about all this, I imagine Samuel actually wishes he hadn’t heard what he’s heard ... that the house of Eli would be crushed and be no more. Maybe, in fact ... he’d like to just run away from the night before, maybe he wants to run from that Voice that had called out to him, maybe he wants to go back to the safety of just being a houseboy, wants things to go back to how they had been ... simple ... known.

OK. But now let’s think also about old Eli here. ‘Cause on hearing about this call the third time, I think Eli just knows ... knows in his old bones that Someone had come in the night. And so he demands, “What did He tell you? What did He say to you in the dark of last night by the ark of God? What’d He say?”

Now, what I think is going on here between them – between Eli and Samuel – is this: Eli has a strong hunch by now Who was calling Samuel ... but he wants to hear the message ... wants to hear that message before he decides for sure who’s calling into Samuel’s life. So Eli demands to know, “What did he say?”

So Samuel answers, "The Voice ... He said you have been warned and warned ... and you have done nothing. And now it is too late. Your house will be torn down and will never rise again." So Eli hears this bone-rattling judgment ... and then, then he just knows. "It is the Lord. Let Him do what seems good to Him." And in that instant, in the old man's eyes, he sees nothing but his own fiery destruction. And so our scene, our story, fades.

III

Well. So here's a question for you to ponder: Does anyone really want to hear the voice of the living God? I wonder. And then ... I wonder which is worse: to hear that Voice in the middle of the night, or not to hear it ... just hearing nothing but silence instead. And I also wonder if all the fears that crowd my brain at 4 a.m. are my ways of avoiding saying, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

Well, on a lot of reflection ... here's what I think. I believe one true nugget from this morning's story is this: If you listen hard enough and long enough ... then God will speak eventually, maybe not audibly ... but God will speak into your life. 'Cause since the beginning of time and then through the Word made flesh in Jesus, God has been speaking to you and me ... and is speaking to us still.

But then follows another question: How do you and I hear God's Word? See ... maybe sometimes His hard words come to you in your person, come to you in your body, come to you in all the events of your life ... if only you can learn to hear what they're saying to you. So as someone said, "in the year King Uzziah died," or in the year John F. Kennedy died ... or in the year Martin Luther King died ... or in the year that someone you loved died ... you go into the temple, or you hide your face in the temple of your hands ... and a Voice says, "Who shall I send into the pain of this world?" And then like Samuel here, you may find yourself answering, "Okay. Send me."

And then a new beginning opens up.

Now someone said that a new beginning can mean a terrible ending ... a terrible ending of some other arrangements ... 'Cause a new beginning can also require you to face candidly all that has failed. Yes, a new beginning can mean a painful cutting off from the past, in order to move forward into the call of a new day.

And then you may hear that Voice saying, "Go." Just go.

And here's the thing. I believe that call is heard where your greatest joy meets the world's greatest needs – or at least your neighbor's needs, or your friends' needs, or your spouse's or lover's needs ... or the needs of that lost soul across town ... or across the street ... or across this suffering, grief-filled world of ours. Your own call is where your own deepest joy meets these other needs.

And so I do believe God's Word is speaking to you and me still, if we're just silent and really listen. ... God calls into your life, maybe holding "God's divine breath" while you and I make our choices.

And you know ... I don't think there's anything very hard about all this. It means simply that you must be very careful with your life, for Christ's sake. Because it would seem that this is the only life you're going to get in this puzzling, perilous world. And so your life is very precious. And what you do with it matters enormously. Everybody knows that. I mean, no one needs to tell you that. But maybe ... in another way ... maybe you do always need to be told that. 'Cause I think there's always the temptation to believe that you have all the time in the world.

But the truth of it is that you do not. You have only one life. And so in the end ... the choice of how you're going to live it must be yours, as you struggle to hear God's call in the clamor ... and the messiness of your life ... God taking the unbelievable wreckage of your life and mine, and making something fine out of it in spite of you and me.

Because that's who God is. And you know what? Sometimes God's call is obvious and sometimes it's not. Sometimes that voice seems to come straight from heaven ... and sometimes it comes through the voices of strangers and friends ... or those we love ... in our persons, in our bodies, in all the events of our lives, if we can learn to hear what they're telling us.

Finally, let me say this: While like Samuel we live in a time when God's voice is rarely heard, I believe that you are surrounded by the presence of God ... our God who calls you still. So here is my final take-home question for you to ponder as you head out for brunch: What is God trying, wanting, longing to say to you? Oh, his message is different for each of you, for me, as different as our own individual lives. Only our beginnings are the same ... our first tiny steps toward finding out ... when you're able to summon up all your courage, open your mouth, and say, "Speak Lord, speak."

Amen.

Resources used: *Synthesis*, Proper 4, Year B; *First and Second Samuel*, Walter Brueggemann, Interpretation Series; Barbara Brown Taylor's "Voices in the Night," found in *Mixed Blessings*.