

Calling in the Night

I Samuel 3:1-10

Epiphany 2 B 1.15.12

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart. (song by Daniel L. Schutte, 1981)

“To love a person,” said Dostoevsky, “means to see him as God intended him to be.” We often see ourselves and one another through some lens other than love. The doctrine of the fall and original sin colors our perception of ourselves and one another. But fallen sinners is not what God intends us to be. God intends original blessing, not original sin. This is grace. God loves us into being and loves us into being worthy of the calling to which we are called. God calls us no matter how unprepared, unready, unlikely or unwilling we may think we are. As the saying goes, God does not call only the equipped. God equips the called.

One of the most endearing stories of the Old Testament is the call of Samuel. God needs to break through the priestly establishment in order to speak a fresh word to the people of Israel. The old priest Eli represents the old religious order which has record low approval

ratings. "The word of the Lord was rare in those days," the text modestly admits, and "visions were not widespread." Malaise might describe the scene. Eli was a blind old man. His blindness is a metaphor. He could not see what was going on around him. The blind stumble or just remove themselves from situations where there may be obstacles. The combination of old age and blindness in this old priest suggests that this particular religious leader had lost much of his capacity to lead; he would not know where to go, nor would he know how to get there if he did know. "Visions were not widespread." It sounds to my ears like a nice and understated way of saying that things were pretty dull. Not much was going on at the Temple or across the land, in terms of what the first president Bush dismissively called "the vision thing."

Eli represents the old and tired and now blind regime, the drifting incumbent party, the lame duck administration, still in place but deflated of spirit on its way out. Old Eli was not the one through whom God could speak a new word for the future. Young Samuel, on the other hand, does represent the future. Samuel can see. Samuel can hear. Samuel is a fresh face, an innocent neophyte. Though untested, Samuel is the promising youth who was the child of Hannah, the once childless old woman who vowed that if she ever did have a baby, she would dedicate him to God.

Some of us old timers remember 1960, when the lame duck president was the tired old general, Dwight Eisenhower, whose best days were behind him. When John Kennedy was elected, his youth and vigor captured the nation and Camelot was born with all the hope and promise that myth represents. A New Frontier and new vision sparked new ideas like the Peace Corps and the challenge to land a man on the moon before the new decade was done. Even as a youngster in a Republican farm family I could not escape the sense of fresh winds blowing in the nation, and the dawn of a new day.

As the Samuel story goes, it was night. Eli was in his room, sleeping. Add those metaphors to his blindness. He was asleep in the night. Nothing much going on for an old blind man, asleep at night. Young Samuel was sleeping near the sacred ark of the covenant, a scene that reminds me of submariners who bunk alongside the torpedoes. The Lord called out to young Samuel, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel of course figured that the voice was that of old Eli. So Samuel got up and went to Eli's room and said, "Here I am for you called me." Eli said, "I did not call you. Go back to bed." After this happened three times, Eli caught on. The voice was God's!

Even though the Word of the Lord was rare and visions were uncommon in those days, old Eli had the sense, the humility and the

spiritual sensitivity to see through his blindness and to imagine that it was God who was calling young Samuel in the night. “Go back again and lie down, and if God calls you, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening’.”

This story is ancient but seems fresh and contemporary. When I was younger, I identified with Samuel. My sister is nine years older than I. My mother wanted a second child, but had some difficulty. When I finally came along, she perceived my healthy birth as an answer to prayer, like Hannah. Thus not only my coming into this world but my call to ministry are somehow tied up with my mother’s faith and the fact that my birth was a longed-for and long-awaited gift. So identifying with Samuel was natural for me. I was young once, too, and eager and fresh and innocent and ready to change the world by overthrowing the establishment. I was a child of the sixties. That was then. This is now: I am the establishment. I am a figurehead in the older generation. Now I identify more with Eli than Samuel!

But notice in this story that both young and old were asleep. The setting at night envelopes both old and young in darkness. We do not see the very presence of God right in our midst, right under our noses, right there in the shadow of the holy ark of the covenant parked in the holy of holies inner sanctum in the center of the temple! Exhaustion

dulls our senses and our hearts, minds and souls. We work all day right in the sacred temple, the dwelling place of the Most High God, and we sleep at night in the shadow of the ark of the covenant, yet we never hear or see God. Our churches, like that ancient temple of Israel at Shiloh, act like museums instead of sanctuaries for the living God. The Word of the Lord is rare. Visions are not widespread. It is night. Everyone sleeps. Young and old.

You would think that such a state of affairs represents a hopeless cause. Better to tear down the old place and rebuild from the ground up than to try to remodel. But that is not the plan. The plan is to speak to the child, the one who does not yet know the Lord, the one to whom God has not yet been revealed. The plan is to call in the night. Wake 'em up and call 'em by name: "Samuel! Samuel!" After the third time, Samuel takes old Eli's advice and says, "Here I am, Lord. Speak, for your servant is listening."

The necessary counterpart to the Stillspeaking God (that we emphasize in the United Church of Christ) is a Still-Listening Church. We have to be attentive to the Word. "Here we are, Lord. We have heard you calling in the night." Just because we think we are not adequately prepared does not mean that God won't call even us into service. Just because we think that we are not sufficiently ready does not mean that God won't

call us in the night. Even us. Just because we think that we are not worthy does not mean that God won't call our names and demand a listening ear. Even of us. As we say, no matter who you or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here, no matter what. This means that God is liable to wake you up in the night and call your name. Even you. No matter how inadequate you may feel. No matter how unprepared, unready, unworthy or unlikely you are in your ordinariness. God may just use you for extraordinary task. God is still speaking. Are we still listening?

The danger is a story like Samuel's is that we don't recognize ourselves in it. The call of God is not just for the few or the proud. It is not like the Marines "looking for a few good men," as they used to say, or more recently on billboards and the sides of truck trailers, the silver sword with the words, "earned, never given." The call of God is not just for the chosen few. It is not just for the religious professional, the priest, the pastor, the rabbi or imam. The call of God is to each and every one of us. In our baptism, God calls all of us to discipleship. All of us are called from sleep, to wake from the darkness and the silence of night and to listen for the voice of God, calling our name. The psalmist is not just referring to some elite chosen one when he says:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

You discern my thoughts from afar.

You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay our hand upon me. ...

For it was you who formed my inward parts;

You knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. (Psalm 139)

None of us are too ordinary for God to call to extraordinary tasks. None too common to be called to uncommon challenges. None too humble for God to call to accomplish great things. None too tired to be given a wake up call to new and abundant life. None too old to be a messenger of God.

This is true for each and every one of us, and it is true for the whole church. There is a little Samuel and a little Eli in us all.

[Insert your name here]! God is calling. God is calling. God is calling.

God is speaking to you. God is speaking to us. Are we listening?