

Can You Hear Me Now?

Psalm 139:1-6, 3-18

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Please pray with me:

O God our Father, who knows us better than we know ourselves, help us to know you. Open our blocked ears and blind eyes to your presence with us now. Help us to hear you call each one of us, and all of us together, by name. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

A few nights ago, I finally had what I would call a good night's sleep. But my deep, dreamless state was rudely interrupted in the darkest hour of night, when I was suddenly snapped wide awake by a noise. It was a loud noise, and something sudden, although it penetrated such deep subconscious that I couldn't identify it—I didn't know what had caused it. Jeff's breathing rumbled gently next to me on the pillow, so it was clear he hadn't heard it. I could hear my heart beating, my breath sighing in and out, even my eyelashes fluttering against the sheets as I strained through the dark to hear if the sound would come again. Did I imagine it? Dream it? Or was there something happening in my household that I needed to wake up to? I don't know, I didn't hear it again...

Now this was even more disturbing because a good night's sleep is a fairly rare occurrence for me. And judging by the vast number of commercials touting sleep aids on our media, I know I'm not alone. It's basically an epidemic, our sleeplessness. I wonder about this epidemic of insomnia. Sure, there can be a zillion causes for it, from too much caffeine to imbalanced hormones, but I know the question I'm most often asked by doctors is "Are you experiencing stress?" ... hmmm... I'm willing to bet that over the past oh, six months or so, the number of households has doubled where you could catch this exchange in the midnight hour: Are you awake? ... unh, I am now!

In these strange and difficult times, many of us have been awoken by our own unrest straining through the dark to hear if something is happening in our households that we need to wake up to.

The Scripture today shines a little moonlight on Samuel, a young boy of ancient Israel who is apprenticed to the priest Eli in the Lord's temple at Shiloh. It seems Samuel, too, is having a hard time getting a good night's sleep. Like us, Samuel lived in a period of political, religious, and social distress, when "every person did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6). Even in the temple at Shiloh, the sons of Eli were wicked men with "no regard for the Lord" (1 Samuel 2:12). They were corrupt in their financial dealings, they took advantage of those around them, they abused the power of their office. It seemed to have been a long time since God had spoken, but the people weren't listening anyway. Times were very dark. And that's where the Scripture starts for us. Nighttime. The priest Eli, who is getting old and blind, in more ways than one, is asleep. His protégé, Samuel, sleeps in the room where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, where a lamp burns every evening from dusk 'til dawn. It's very dark, the wee hours of the morning. The flame flickers and sputters on the lamp of God, but it hasn't yet gone out. Listen for the Word of God to us today from First Samuel 3:1-20:

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 Eli 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. This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!***

A night scene—darkness both physical and spiritual in the life of Israel. The land is in chaos and most folks are living as though God does not exist. But the lamp of God has not gone out... the light still shines in the darkness.

Samuel, like some of us, is having a hard time getting a good night's sleep. Something keeps waking him up, although he can't really identify it. Three times, he hears it and three times, he tiptoes into Eli's room to say, "Here I am! Did you call me?" "No! Go back to sleep!" The word of the Lord was rare in those days... the people were sleeping... and it must have seemed like God was sleeping too. But no... he stood there, delightfully and disturbingly awake, and called out clearly.

Can you hear me now? ... Can you hear me now? ... Can you hear me now?

We all know that commercial - the cell phone technician moving from one spot to another through a vast wilderness, or enormous stadium, testing, testing, testing for reception. I wonder if God's like that, standing there before us, calling out to us even as we strain our ears in the dark... *Can you hear me now?*

Samuel discovered, and Israel discovered, and we shall discover, that although we may be distracted and confused, asleep—even deaf to God's voice, God is intimately, ultimately, persistently, eternally awake and available to us. *Can you hear me now?*

It's a classic call story. It's the story of God who knows us by name and calls each one of us even though we often have a hard time hearing. It's the story of God who often calls us in the middle of our darkest hour. It's the story of God who names us, claims us, and persistently stands before us until we respond. And it's the story of God who calls us out of the old into something new.

God's call is assured. It will come to us all, sooner or later, for the will and purpose of God are enacted through real people in real time. This is the meaning of our baptism that we reaffirmed last Sunday. God calls us by name, claims us as his own, and uses us to make the Kingdom come. Sometimes we take a while to understand it. Sometimes we need someone with more experience to interpret it for us. Almost always it will frighten us, because always, always it will change us. For Samuel and Eli that change was radical—I'm doing something that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle. The old order will pass away, I am making all things new. *Can you hear me now?*

It takes courage to listen for that call in the quiet of our hearts, courage to live into our faith, courage to face the living God who knows us when we were knit together in our mother's womb, who discerns our thoughts from far away, who is acquainted with all our ways. The God who loves us completely and unconditionally just as we are and way too much to leave us that way. It takes courage for us to follow a man named Jesus who demonstrates with his life and with his death and with his resurrection the boundless limitless possibilities of living as people who know ourselves to be children of God. For when we live into that truth, we shall indeed be changed.

Change is certainly an overused word these days... after 2008 you probably never want to hear that word again. And in many cases, the changes we see may not bear the imprint of the divine. In so much of what swirls around us, we feel disoriented and dismayed. We instinctively resist change in all its forms, because we know things will be different. But I think today is an especially good day to stop and take account of change that is a new story, a new way of being, a new narrative, listening for God's call and claim upon our lives, the change by which we all can become the people we are designed to be—living into our baptism in Christ.

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day, and whether you plan to march or sing or stop to pray, take some time to think about the man who never wanted to be a preacher, but who became one because his father expected him to. Martin Luther King never wanted to be a national civil rights leader. He was actually hoping for a quiet life as a professor. But the way it turned out, he was thrust into the forefront of the Montgomery bus boycott. He returned home late one night, tired and frightened. The phone rang and an angry voice on the other end said, "We're gonna get you nigger!" He stood in his kitchen, frozen in fear. He wanted to call his dad for reassurance and advice. But his dad wasn't there. Then he said it was as though he heard a voice. "Martin, you do what's right. You stand up for justice. You be my drum major for righteousness. I'll be with you." Martin Luther King had heard his name called. He answered the call and his life was changed and through his life, used so well by God, the world was changed forever.¹

It seems fitting and marvelous that the day after tomorrow is Inauguration Day, when we will see the first African American become president. Maybe you voted for him, maybe you didn't, but I pray no matter who we voted for, we can all be united in wonder that this election could not have been imagined, even by Martin Luther King, such a short time ago. Stephanie Paulsell, in a recent article in the *Christian Century*², noted that the county she grew up in North Carolina for years marked its county line with a billboard proclaiming "The Ku Klux Klan Welcomes You." In November 2008, Barack Obama carried that county by a margin of 7 percent. Out of our shameful history of racism and oppression, we see emerging a new narrative for us all, a new way of being. We catch a vision of the people we might become. *Can you hear me now?*

This is the essence of what Harvard professor and pastor Peter Gomes defines as Gospel, the Good News: that you don't have to be as you are. You don't have to be stuck in the story you tell yourself, or trapped in the fear that keeps you awake at night. You can set a new course, discover God's story for you, answer Jesus' invitation to be born again... and again... and again. As Paulsell reminds us, "Jesus never tired of inviting people to change. Sell all you own and give your money to the poor, and come, follow me. Go your way and do not sin again. Follow me, and I will make you fish for people. Jesus believes people are capable of radical change and that in itself is good news."³

So, next time you wake with a start in the dark of the night, knowing the land is in chaos and most folks are living as though God does not exist, remember, the lamp of God has not gone out... the light still shines in the darkness. Don't be afraid. Instead, take a deep breath and say out loud "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

¹ Will Willimon, *The Dangers of Going To Church*, unpublished sermon. 1/19/1997.

² Stephanie A. Paulsell. Faith Matters, *Christian Century*. December 16, 2008. 37.

³ *ibid.*