

“Here I am!”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, June 3, 2018
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20)

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.”
1 Samuel 3:1-10

Be with me in the spirit of prayer. Wise and compassionate God, remind us that it is in *your* stories that we can find *our* truths. Forgive us when we sometimes miss *your* message while we focus on *our* failings rather than on your ongoing presence in our lives. Open our minds and hearts to receive your lessons for us this day that we might leave this place renewed, refreshed and ready to begin again this life of faith you offer to each of us. Amen.

Hear our Scripture passage for today, told as a story with a little added reflection... Samuel yawned a big yawn, stretched his arms, and snuggled in his bed. All day he had been working in the house of worship and learning from Eli. Eli was a priest who loved God and helped Samuel to know God, too. But... Eli was very old and stiff. I imagine many of us can identify with Eli’s stiffness! He couldn’t see very well, and he probably found it difficult to bend down when he dropped something. *I* can definitely identify with that problem! So Samuel was also Eli’s helper.

Now Samuel was ready for sleep. It was dark in the room except for a small lamp burning dimly. It was Samuel’s job to keep the light burning all night. Eli was asleep in another room. Have you ever slept close by when an ailing parent or partner or child slept in another room? I have.

Soft night sounds were all around. The wind whispered outside the window. A night bug chirped in a corner of the room. Makes me think of hearing the first peepers in the Spring here in Maine, or the crickets rubbing their little legs together in the Fall out in the fields. And very soon Samuel started to drift off to sleep. Suddenly, he heard a voice whisper, “Samuel.” Have YOU ever heard a voice in your dreams? I have.

“It’s Eli,” Samuel thought. He threw back his bedcover, got up, and ran to Eli.

“Here I am! You called me.”

Eli rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “No, Samuel, I did not call you; go back to your bed and get some sleep.”

So Samuel went back to bed. The wind still whispered outside his window. The night bug continued to chirp in the corner. Soon Samuel heard the voice again, "Samuel, Samuel."

Once more, Samuel got up and ran to where Eli was. But Eli repeated what he had said earlier. "I did not call you; go back to your bed and get some sleep. You must have been dreaming."

So Samuel returned to his bed. The wind was still whispering outside his window. The night bug chirped in the corner. Then Samuel heard it again, "Samuel, Samuel." Our text for this morning tells us, "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." (1 Sam 3:7)]

He was confused. What was happening? Was this a dream or did he really hear his name? He rushed back to Eli. Samuel tapped on Eli's shoulder and again explained what had happened.

Eli sighed, "Samuel, if either of us is going to get any sleep tonight, we need to find out who is calling you. I have an idea who it might be. The next time you hear the voice calling your name, I don't want you to come running in here. I want you to say, 'Here I am, God. I am listening. What do you want me to do?'"

Samuel's eyes opened wide. "Do you mean that it is God calling me?"

"Do as I tell you," said Eli, "and we'll find out."

So Samuel went back to his bed. He crawled under his bedcover and listened. The wind whispered outside his window. The night bug chirped in the corner. "Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening.'" (1 Sam 3:10)]

From that moment until Samuel was himself an old man, God talked to him, giving him messages to pass on to the people. And, just like the first time, God's messages never failed to leave Samuel wide-eyed with wonder.¹

There are a number of "call stories" in the Bible -- from the call of Noah in Genesis to the call of Paul in the Letters of the New Testament -- those mystic experiences of divine appointment to serve God. Do you remember when and how you were called to a life of faith?

I finally heard God's call in my late 40's. I received a lot of messages, maybe like Samuel hearing his name called and not knowing who was calling him. I certainly didn't know I was receiving holy messages at the time, and didn't make sense of the call until later... and I've remained "wide-eyed with holy wonder" ever since.

I began seminary at the age of 47. And I've never looked back. But hearing God's messages doesn't necessarily mean one has to go to seminary and long to become an ordained minister. Lots of people have and are doing amazing work for the benefit and the care of others who have never been to seminary. Some of them don't even profess to have any belief in God. I believe the point of it all is not so much to *speak* of God, but to *do* of God.

Here's the question for the day: What does it take to hear and recognize God's call? I think of two people in my life who gave me the same advice. The first person was my secretary, Theresa, in Bradenton, Florida in the mid 1980's. At the time, I was a Certified Financial Planner for American Express. One day Theresa simply said to me, "Susan, faith is a matter of paying attention." I think I smiled politely and nodded my head. Theresa was a devout Catholic, a mother of nine, who went to Mass every morning. I was NOT a church goer at that time in my

¹Adapted from a story entitled "A Voice in the Night" from *Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, January 15, 2012, p. 120.

life. I thought Christians were all a bunch of dogooders and hypocrites. But.... several years later... I started to pay attention, as Theresa said to me.

The other person who reaffirmed that advice was Bessie Dean who was the second oldest member of our congregation in Lincolnville while I was there. "All you have to do is pay attention," Bessie would say, and then she would add with a smile, "Let go, let God." It sounds so simple, and yet I spent the first half of my life thinking I didn't have a clue about all this God stuff and didn't care about any of it anyway. I was busy running my life MY way, not God's way.

Who in *your* life has affected you in spiritual ways? Who has *drawn you in* to confessing a life of faith?

Hearing and acting on God's call can be risky business though. It can take you to places you never thought you wanted to go. It can take you to places you thought you could not endure. It can get you killed. It got Jesus killed. Yet... based on my experience... it's rewarding – beyond all my expectations... to hear God's call and act on it. It's exhilarating in ways I could never have imagined before I "knew the Lord." It's what can save us from ourselves and all our insecurities and doubts. It's what can lead us not into temptation but into a life of service and grace and love for one another and for all of God's creation.

Unfortunately, we're far from that, aren't we.... Some days the first verse of our passage from 1 Samuel for today rings all too true – "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." (1 Sam 3:1) It seems to me that religion is too often used as a qualifications test rather than an affirmation of God. I think I'm focused on this right now because of political primaries happening next week and all the political signs everywhere!

Religious confessions too often have become the line in the sand of politics and social justice for too many people. You'd better be on the majority's side of the line with your religious beliefs, or you're not going to be supported. It is unfortunately becoming as simple and as sad as that in our country, even though I refuse to believe there isn't a wideness to God's mercy for us all.

I don't believe many of these religious opinions have much to do with "the word of the Lord." They have only to do with one's personal thoughts and experiences, one way or the other, regarding religious doctrine and personal piety. Yes, "the word of the Lord" is still rare in our days.(1 Sam 3:1) Too often whatever visions there are seem to relate more to one's individual likes and dislikes in *one's own group* than to *God's* will, God's desire for *all people* to be honored and respected and cared for.

Yes, hearing God's call can get a person into a lot of trouble in more ways than one. Some will think you're definitely "called," and others will think you're a sham artist, using religion to get what you want out of your own life. It's enough to make a person want to give it all up some days, but... some of us don't. I *am* retired as the pastor of United Christian Church in Lincolnville. But I doubt I'll ever retire from wanting to share the teachings and the saving grace of the Scriptures and of Jesus in sermons and in pastoral care.

Yes, some days "the word of the Lord" seems rare and visions are sometimes not widespread, but a new day comes every day with another chance to hear God's call and respond, "Here I am! Speak for your servant is listening." (1 Sam 3:4, 6, 8, 10) Do *you* hear the call? Are you *listening*? Let the people say, "Amen."