

February 4 , 2019
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Text: 1 Sam 3:1-11
Title: "Night Vision"



A childless woman grieves for a child. Not only are her maternal desires unfulfilled; it was a disgrace to be barren in her culture. Her husband's other wife kept taunting her, gloating over her, insulting her. The other wife was not barren. Each year their family made a pilgrimage to Shilo, the shrine of the Israelites where the arc of the covenant was kept. Arc of covenant is the holy of holiest places in their culture. Families make a holy pilgrimage to Shilo to worship. Each year the barren woman makes the journey, and she prays for a baby. Each year she returns to Shilo with her mothering arms empty and her heart broken a little more. One year she went to the shrine and wept and prayed with all her might so loudly - that the priest thought she was drunk.

He scolded "How long will you make a public spectacle of yourself? Put your wine away woman!"

She responded "I'm not drunk. I pour out my soul before the lord..." Hannah tells her heartbreak to the priest. The priest offers a blessing upon her. She returns home. Lo and behold, that year she bears a long-awaited child. She doesn't go to the shrine the next year, for she is nursing her baby, but when her child is weaned, she makes the pilgrimage again. It is a bitter sweet journey. She is oh so grateful for her answered prayers. She can't take her eyes off her toddler boy. He stole her heart at first cry. Yet she now must fulfill her vow, and that must have broken her heart.

She dedicates her baby boy to service of the Lord in the shrine. She didn't have him dedicated and take him home. This wasn't some kind of christening. She took her toddler and provisions for him, and left her little boy, the baby of her heart's yearning, she gave her child to the priest, "for service to the Lord." The priest accepted the child as a servant. Once a year, Hannah would get to see her beloved son when they made their pilgrimage to Shilo. The priest raised the child. The boy learned prayers; how to light the candles; how to clean the altar after a sacrifice; how to fill the oil vessels; how to prepare the priest's robes and clean them. At night, a lamp was lit in the tent where the arc of the covenant was kept. It remained lit from sundown till sunup. The boy's duty was to sleep in that space all night to insure the light did not go out; the arc remained safe. The little boy had a big responsibility. He wore his own little robe, much simpler than the priests, but a new one that his mother brought to him each year when she visited. The priest was called Eli. The boy was named was Samuel.

Samuel's call story announces a dramatic change that is coming- not just in Samuel's life but a total transition of power and structure for what would become the nation of Israel. At the onset of this story, the Hebrew people are simply a loose confederation of tribes. The tribes are led by various judges and priests. The priests at the center of Shilo, the special shrine where the arc of the covenant holds God's presence near, the priests in the only spot that could be considered a centralized sacred point.. to say, they engage in immoral and corrupt activities, puts it mildly. We don't need to go into detail on all their sordid deeds, but trust me, 24/7 news channels would

fill their program time with scandal headlines from these priests. To say that these priests are not listening or looking for God is an understatement. These disgraceful priests have inherited their positions from their father, the old faithful, righteous priest whose eyesight is growing dim, Eli.

As these in authority, those who are expected to be most adept at listening and seeing God's presence fail to do their job, God speaks to one who can hear and to one whose eyes might be dimming, but whose spirit can still see in the dark mystery of God. Eli has trained Hannah's boy, Samuel, but his training is not over. The young boy's sleep is disturbed when he hears his name. He runs to the old man, maybe yawning a bit sleepily the boy says, "Ok, you called, I'm here, what do you want?"

The old man stirs in his sleep and says, "Why are you waking me up, child? It's not morning, go back to bed."

Samuel goes back to his mat near the arc of the covenant, lies down, and hears his name again. Wondering if the old man is just teasing him, or if this part of the training, Samuel gets up, goes in the old priest's room, "Ok Eli, here I am, now, what do you want?"

Eli grumbles once more, "What do I want? I want to get some sleep. You're the one who's waking me up! Cut it out. Get back to bed, child." Taking this child to raise in his old age, might not have been the best idea.

Samuel goes back to his mat, wondering if the old guy is just messing with him or maybe he's gone off his rocker. Samuel tosses his thin blanket around a bit, punches his rolled up tunic used as 'pillow' puts his head down and before he can close his eyes, he hears it again. "You've got to be kidding me!" but faithful and obedient as he has been taught, he hauls himself up and goes to the old priest. "Samuel, reporting as summoned."

The old man, "You again!" and then the old priest pauses before he chastised the boy. The One who calls our name is the one who knows our name. The old priest grinned; his gruff voice became gentle, "Go and listen, my child. For it is God, who speaks to you."

This listening for God in the depths of our nights, in the innermost being of our soul, this learning to listen, learning to recognize God whispers in the deep beauty of dark mystery is a lesson we learn from one another — in community with one another — as students, disciples in union with the Spirit of God that Jesus proclaimed lives within us.

Samuel obeyed and he listened. What he heard was disturbing. Eli's sons, the priests that were in place, would no longer lead the people; Eli's era, priestly rule was ending. Israel would enter a new phase of her history. This story that the Israelites passed down through the generations marked a turning point. Samuel would listen. Samuel would become the last of the Hebrew judges and the first of her prophets. He would anoint her first two kings. He wasn't perfect. He did no better in raising godly sons than Eli had done, but he listened for the wisdom the holy revealed and he followed.

It was January 1996. My daughters were at a sleepover; my husband was had moved out that day, so I had the house to myself. I did some reading, sat in the moments of solitude, and when it was time, I turned out the lights and went to bed. In

those days, I slept soundly usually the whole night through. My girls had grown past the years of toddlers crawling into my bed at night; sleep came easily. So it was unusual when I found myself suddenly sitting straight upright in bed in total darkness. There were words hanging in the air, “I have given you the light, follow it through the darkness.” I was awake. Who said that? Was someone there? Had I dreamed a robed figure at the foot of my bed? I got out of bed and looked in each vacant room. I opened the back door and peered into a full moon illuminating an empty yard. There was no one visible. I went back to bed and quickly fell back to sleep. At morning, I pondered the nocturnal words of the experience, “I have given you the light, follow it through the darkness.” Sitting with those words that morning, one word gave me direction, “follow.”

So I finally quit the wrestling match I’d been in with God for the preceding months, and said, “Okay, God, you win. but you’ll have to lead the way. then I will follow” The next day, I talked to my pastor about answering God’s call to ordained ministry, but I didn’t tell him about the night vision or voice. The next week, I talked to the District Superintendent about going to seminary, but I didn’t tell him about the night experience either. In the next months, I talked to church committees, seminary deans, friends and family, and boards of ordained ministry. They helped me to follow the call. They made a way for me. But in all the conversations - over the next 15 years- I didn’t tell any of them about THE night.

Why? Several reasons. Mostly, because “the word of the lord [is] rare... visions [are] not widespread” or at least that’s what we think. People don’t just go around telling people “I heard voices last night and no one was there. I think it was God.” Those who repeat such things are viewed skeptically for good reason. The truth is we need each other, to discern, to learn, to listen together. Just as Sammuell needed Eli to help him recognize God’s voice in the night.

We need each other, the ears of youth who are not too closed to hear what God is doing anew. We need the insight of the elderly, whose dimming vision is still quite clear. We need each other to unpack and process and encourage journeys of depth into the dazzling darkness of God’s presence.

I believe the word of the Lord is not so rare. We may be hard of hearing them, hard of listening. I believe visions of God’s kingdom are wide and beautiful. I believe God is calling all of us to follow, and all of us to lead into God’s vision of glory. The Divine Cosmic Energy of Grace and Wonder is singing justice into the world and is doing a new thing, and is calling our names.

May we hear, may we listen, may we answer.