

SAMUEL'S CALLING

Post Christian Church and Post Presbyterian Church

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I Samuel 3: 1-10

A while ago my nine-year old daughter awakened me in the middle of the night to tell me she had had a bad dream. Katherine told me the details of her scary dream and how she woke up when a bad guy was chasing her. After we talked for a few minutes and she got in our bed, I told her she was okay and I asked if she was still afraid. Katherine said she was no longer scared and was ready to go back to sleep. As I stroked her head I thought of all the nights I have been awakened by bad dreams or the need to worry and obsess over the unfinished things in my life. In the middle of the night the things that worry us crowd in on us and seem to be bigger and scarier than in the light of day. The fears that stalk us in the dark when we are unable to sleep and to rest peacefully, make benign things seem bad and bad things seem much, much worse.

In a sermon about Samuel's calling, entitled "**Voices In the Night,**" the Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor says, "At four in the morning, my bed can become a coffin. Everything I do not

understand crowds in on me: the meaning of life and death, the fate of the earth and my fate, the size of the universe, where God is and what God thinks of the mistakes I've made. They bear down on me without mercy until I somehow manage to put my panicked brain back to sleep. Sometimes I think all of my worrying in the middle of the night about the bills, my health, my family, my life, death, and the universe---all that is what I worry about to avoid saying in the middle of the night, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' Sometimes I wonder which is worse: to hear the voice of the living God or not to hear it, to face fainting at the power of it or to live oblivious to it, eaten up by the thousand little fears that may prevent its ever getting through." (From **Mixed Blessings**; p. 17-23)

How do we distinguish God's call to us and how do we recognize the times when God's voice is calling us by name? In one of our faith tradition's oldest call stories, God comes to a young boy, Samuel, and it is in a voice in the dark. Only Samuel doesn't recognize the voice of God; rather Samuel thinks it is the voice of the old priest Eli, with whom, he is living and apprenticing. 'Samuel,' the voice says, and Samuel gets up from his bed and goes to Eli, and says, 'Here I am'. Three times it happens: the voice says his name and Samuel thinks it is Eli calling him.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “It is not Eli who has called Samuel, but by the time Samuel has awakened Eli for the third time, Eli has a hunch who it might be that is calling the young boy. We are told that Samuel does not yet know the Lord, which seems incredible for someone, even a boy of twelve, who has spent his whole life working and living in the Lord’s house. Perhaps there is more to knowing God than being in church all the time!

After the third time of being awakened by an eager-to-please Samuel, Eli rubs the sleep from his eyes and tells Samuel what to say the next time he hears the voice. Say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,” Eli tells the young boy and that is exactly what Samuel does. It is a turning point for Samuel, a point on which his whole life turns, not only because of what he hears but also because of what he says, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Samuel is no longer a child, a temple lackey who comes running at the sound of his name. He has become a young man, a servant of God who is ready to hear what the Lord has to say to him next.”

(Excerpted from “Voices in The Night;” Mixed Blessings, p. 21)

I love the story of God calling the young boy Samuel. After reading commentaries and sermons and pondering the call of God in my own life, I realize that this is not primarily a story of

Samuel's faithfulness but rather it is first and foremost a story about God's initiative and God's wonderful persistence in Samuel's life and ultimately, in your life and mine. It takes four tries to get Samuel's attention and the sense of the story is that God will stay at it as long as it takes. I find great comfort in God's calling of Samuel and the idea that God persistently pursues us and patiently waits for us to hear and to respond.

In the midst of the many voices we hear and want to hear and try hard sometimes not to hear, how do we recognize God's voice when it speaks to us? We know that God's message is different for each of us, as different as our fingerprints and our lives, and so how do we know what God is trying to say to us? Barbara Brown Taylor says, "only our beginnings are the same, our first steps toward finding out what God is saying to us, when we are able to summon all our courage, open our mouths, and say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

The story of Samuel and Eli suggests that we need safe people in our lives who love us, who know us well and who have our best interests at heart to help us hear what God is saying to us through our relationships, gifts, passions and dreams. Rather than assuming we know what God is telling other people to do in their lives,

perhaps as ministers to each other and as fellow travelers, we are to remind each other to simply listen to the voice of God calling each of our names in the middle of our lives.

Wise, old Eli was the priest of the temple where Samuel lived and served, and many priests and ministers think it is up to them to tell others what God wants them to say and do. However, in this story, Eli never supposes to know what God is going to speak to Samuel. Rather than try to interpret the voice of God for Samuel or be the voice of God to Samuel, Eli simply suggests that Samuel might try listening to the voice calling his name. It took the wisdom of a fellow traveler, old Eli, to help Samuel make sense of what was happening to him and to discern whose voice he was truly hearing.

In a sermon about this great story entitled, “**Listen**,” John Buchanan said, “Perhaps the best priestly advice old Eli ever gave to Samuel was: Listen. I love this story because I believe God does call you and me. I believe the voice of God comes to us—in the world, in the beauty of a sunset, the power of a storm, or a newborn’s cry, telling us that creation is good and holy and a gift given to us new every morning, calling us to gratitude and praise. I believe God calls us in the voice of others, the poor, the oppressed, the vulnerable and marginalized, the children—the voice of God

summoning us to be faithful and obedient, kind and just, compassionate and generous. And I believe God speaks to us in great art and beautiful music and noble causes like Civil Rights, like peace, like an end to hunger, like education and opportunity for all the children—causes that tug at our hearts and consciences and summon us to get up and do something. **(Sermon preached at The Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago on January 15, 2006)**

In the book, **My Grandfather's Blessings**, Dr. Rachel Remen tells a powerful story of how one of her little patient's mother helped her to affirm God's call to open a new door in her medical career. In this story, Dr. Remen suggests to us that when we are able to more clearly hear the voices, stories and plights of others, perhaps it is then that we are hearing the voice of God in our midst.

Dr. Remen said, "I first met Delia in the emergency room when the police arrested her. Two hours before, she had brought her three-week-old son, Teejay, to the hospital because of a fever. The resident doctor who was called to see him that evening was struck by his small size and noted several bruises on his skin. Teejay was the child of a very young, unmarried mother on welfare. The resident made a presumptive diagnosis of child abuse, and, keeping Delia and her son in the emergency room under the pretext of waiting for tests, he had called the authorities."

Dr. Remen explained, “I became involved because, as attending physician, I was responsible for all the pediatric emergency care for the month. By the time I arrived at the emergency room, Teejay had been scheduled for admission to the hospital under a protective order. The police and I met in the doorway of his examining room and I insisted on examining the baby myself before they took his mother away. Reluctantly, the police agreed.

Delia was fourteen when she discovered that she was pregnant and left high school. There in the examining room she looked at me in despair. She was holding her baby tightly in her arms. I asked her if she would undress him for me and I watched her as she handled him. Her hands were covered with tattoos. They were gentle and tender. She laid him naked on the examining table and covered him with his little woolen blanket. Teejay was tiny and thin. He appeared to be dehydrated. Concerned, I began to question his mother about his care. Hesitantly she told me how hungrily he fed and how he often vomited up everything he swallowed. She mentioned how long and hard he cried and how difficult he was to comfort.

I looked at the resident leaning against the wall with his arms crossed in front of him. “Have you considered pyloric stenosis?” I

asked him, suggesting the possibility of a thickening of the intestine at the exit of the stomach, a common cause of persistent vomiting and failure to thrive in the newborn period. But he had not. I examined the baby's tiny belly with one finger. Just below his breast bone in the area of the pylorus was a little mass the size of an olive, the classic sign of stenosis.

“What makes you think that this infant is abused?” I asked him.

“Well, he's three weeks and doesn't even weigh what he weighed at birth,” he answered with some irritation. “And he's covered with bruises.” Stepping forward, he turned Teejay onto his stomach. Over both his shoulders and at the base of his spine were several flat, bluish discolorations. They were the typical birthmarks seen in seventy to eight percent of darker-skinned newborn infants.

X rays confirmed a diagnosis of pyloric stenosis. After the police had been sent away and Teejay had been admitted and scheduled for surgery, I sat down and spoke with his mother, apologizing to her for what had happened. “It's okay, Doctor, she told me. “It's okay. They doan' listen. I tole them I never hurt my baby but they doan' hear. They never hears.”

Dr. Remen said, “Her story made my heart ache. I followed Teejay and his mother for the next year and a half in my own practice.

When I left pediatrics in 1976, he was the last patient I ever saw. In the hours before his final visit, I cleaned out my desk and sent the boxes from my office off with the movers, all the while questioning if I was doing the right thing by throwing away my career as a pediatrician to follow a dream of a different sort of medicine. Over the years I had been a pediatrician, I had been involved in the lives of thousands of children. Would I ever care for children again? I was not at all sure that I would.

The nurse called to tell me that Teejay and Delia were waiting, and with a heavy heart, I went to see them. Teejay had become a delicious and loving toddler. He shrieked and put up his arms to be hugged as soon as he saw me. As I examined him, I was again overwhelmed by doubt. I loved my little patients. How could I not be a pediatrician? I had trained for this work for almost half of my life and I had no idea what would happen next or even where I would go.

Afterward as we talked, Delia, knowing that it was my last day of work, kindly asked how I was feeling. We had spoken often over the last few months about my leaving. She had supported my belief that medicine needed to change, that ways could be found to care for people's hearts and souls as well as their bodies, to empower

people in their own healing. Back then I had been certain I was making the right choice, but now that the moment had actually come, I felt very afraid. “Delia,” I told her, “perhaps Teejay will be my last little patient.”

At the thought of not seeing the children, tears filled my eyes. Very gently Delia reached across and laid her hand on mine. She reminded me of the terrible night on which we had met. How no one had heard her, no one had believed her. Her baby had almost been taken away. “This hospital is sick,” she told me, “can’t see, can’t hear, ain’t got no heart and no soul. They all that way. Maybe you can’t see lotsa little baby patients anymore, but you is still a doctor.”

She looked away from me for a few moments. “I be praying for you,” she told me softly. “You works for The Man, He take care of you. Doan’ worry. He take you where you need to go.” And, taking the little gold cross from around her neck, she reached out and put it around mine.”

On this day, may we be more responsive to the voice of God that calls us by name and may our love and care of others enable us all to hear and live more fully. May we know that we too “works for

The Man” and that no matter what, He will take care of us and He will indeed “take us where we need to go.”

Let us pray, We thank you, O God, that You know us, love us and continue to call us to more fully embrace the gift of life we have been given. We are humbled by the fact that You relentlessly pursue us and patiently wait for us to be aware of your presence in the dreams and deliberations of our lives. May our loving, kind and non-judgmental presence in the lives of others, help us all to better hear your call in the ordinary routines of our lives and may we give each other the courage to say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” In the name of the One who stirs us to greater life and deeper faith, we pray, AMEN.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

On this day, we thank you for all that we have and all that we are. We pray that our passion for having would one day find peace in our passion for giving. Help us, O God, to see that the way to power, to courage and to abundance is the way of gratitude. In Jesus name we pray, AMEN.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Gracious God, we gather together on this cold winter morning hoping to experience a sense of your presence in our midst that will help us to feel less fragmented and more comfortable with the spiritual part of us that connects us more fully to ourselves, to each other and to you. O God, in the midst of our problems, busyness, distractions, work, and relationships, remind us that you are the One who continues to call us and offer us perspective, promise, healing and hope beyond the narrow view of reality that is familiar and known to us. In our attempts to find You and hear You and discern Your will for our lives, we forget that it is You who is seeking after us. Help us to wait with hope and to remain open to your endless and insane possibilities that come to us in the ordinary events of our lives from friends and strangers who usually unknowingly act as your messengers of grace and promise, assurance and comfort.

As we open our fragile selves and fragmented lives to your love and purposes, help us to see that it is probably more important to do acts of love and kindness toward others than it is to try and live a pure and holy life that is really not much good to anybody. On this day we are reminded that you call us by name and we are humbled by

the fact that we are here not for our own amusement but to do your holy work, to make this place a little better, a little easier for the challenged, and a little more gentle, kind and hospitable. We pray O God, for the courage to live lives of love and peace and generosity that reflect our gratitude to you for the gift of life we have been given and for the love and care and connections we experience in the ups and downs of life.

Please be with our friends and loved ones who are especially upset by illness, depression, grief, tragedy, or uncertainty. We pray especially for Nelda and Giles, Jodi and Maggie, Annie Laura, Lea and Casey, Bud and Janie's son-in-law, Randy, Inez's granddaughter, Lauren and Jan's mother. Give them a sense of peace and presence that will enable them to weather the storms in their lives and come out on the other side more whole. Gather us all more fully into your love and purposes that our lives may reflect the love that has claimed us and continues to sustain us. Let us pray together, Our Father, who art in heaven...