

1 Samuel 3: 1-10 "Master Speak, For Your Servant is Listening" 3/10/19 Rev. Janet Chapman

On this day when we have lost an hour of our sleep, we encounter a scripture about sleeping, or the lack thereof. All this week, media has been reminding us to move our clocks forward and to prepare for the transition. For some of us, sleep is already a rare commodity and good luck trying to get to bed an hour earlier. A little boy, who was known for having difficulties falling asleep, was spending the night over at his grandparents. When at home, he would get up for a glass of water, go to the bathroom, and call for his parents asking when the night would be over? But at his grandparents, it wasn't long before he quickly fell asleep. In the morning, after a sound sleep, he jumped out of bed and ran into the kitchen to greet his grandparents. He exclaimed, "Grandma and Grandpa, guess what? It doesn't take as long to sleep all night at your house as it does mine!"

For whatever reason, we are a society just like this little boy who struggle with getting enough or too much sleep. For me, insomnia hits usually about 4 in the morning – why then, I have no idea? I lay awake staring into the dark, listening to the breathing of the dogs, readjusting my pillow, taking stock of various aches and pains, and then the worries begin to set in, worries that become trivial as soon as the sun comes up, but really can scare the bejeebin's out of me in the middle of the night. I asked a friend once what she thought was the problem and she laughed saying, "Welcome to my world and the joys of getting older." Well, I don't know about joys, but now I am on a search for what to do with myself at 4 in the morning? Some folks tell me they walk the dog, get up and cook, pinch dead leaves off houseplants, read a book...and make lists, my personal favorite. What everyone seems to have in common is an uneasiness in the middle of the night, if not a downright fear of the night, of the literal power of darkness to make benign things seem bad and bad things seem much worse. Maybe you know

what I am talking about? A part of the uneasiness is the awareness that certain voices in the night don't always have good things to say to us. I can't tell you in those moments what I am more afraid of – that I will hear an actual voice address me out of the silence or that I will hear absolutely, definitively, nothing at all.

If we think nighttime can be frightening to us, just imagine what it was for 12 year old Samuel, who had to sleep in the temple next to the ark of God? It was rumored to hold all those sacred relics of Israel's past: a container of manna, Aaron's rod, the tablets of the covenant. Sleeping next to it must have been like sleeping in a graveyard, but Samuel seemed used to it. Night after night, his hair filled with the smoke of the daily burnt offerings and his clothes splattered with animal blood, he lay down beside the ark and pulled his cloak around him, trying not to sleep in case his mentor Eli called him during the night. Eli was the blind old temple priest who had heard Samuel's mother, Hannah, pray for a child and vowed to do anything to become a mother. Eli blessed Hannah's prayer and true to her word, she returned the child to God to be raised under Eli's guidance.

This story is filled with important details that are pregnant with meaning, right from the opening verse... "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." What does that sound like to you? Divine revelations were not a common occurrence. We have passed the age of miracles, no pillars of fire, no columns of smoke or parting of seas. Most of what follows is a worldly history of successes, defeats, and palace intrigue. Maybe it is because the people have given up on hearing a word from God, their ears are as stopped up as Eli's eyes are clouded? Recognizing God's activity in the world is harder to do in a time when, as Judges 21 states, "all the people did what was right in their own eyes." Does this sound familiar? This

story could easily be placed in our own time and we may shiver to think we are on our own.

Take poor Samuel, for example, who has no experience with divine revelations nor expects to have one. When he hears a voice whispering, calling out his name, he thinks it is Eli asking him to do some temple task. The voice he hears is probably very common, not supernatural at all, otherwise why would he run so quickly to Eli's aid? Not unlike you and I, Samuel is sleeping and does not fully sense the divinity around us. Exhaustion has so dulled our hearts, minds, and souls that we can work all day in the temple but never hear God. It is both ironic and sad that God's voice is so unexpected in the temple – it has become more of a museum than a place to meet the living God. We find ourselves sound asleep and then the voice of God awakens us, even when we can't identify it, and we can't rest until we know who is calling us and why.

Samuel, whose name means "God has heard," does get a call out of the darkness, not once, but three times, and three times he answers, "Here I am." It is a variation on "I'm coming," and he goes running to see what Eli wants. But it isn't Eli who has called him and by the time Samuel wakes Eli up for the third time, Eli has a hunch who it might be. Instead of scolding the boy, Eli rubs the sleep away and tells Samuel to respond, "Speak, Master, your servant is listening." It is a turning point for Samuel, not only because what he hears, but because of what he says, "Speak, Master, your servant is listening." He is no longer a child, a temple go-fer who comes running at every beckon and call. He has become a young man, a servant of God who is ready to hear what the Lord has to say to him. Compared to the courage that will require, sleeping next to the ark was nothing! The message takes courage to hear as well, because it condemns Eli's house forever, old sight-impaired Eli, the only family Samuel has ever known. Eli is being condemned because his foolish sons have gotten into the habit of

stealing the best cuts of meat from the temple and taking them home for a feast. Eli warned them but they wouldn't stop, and now the bill for their wrongdoing has come due. It is a hard message and surely not one that Samuel wants to share. Think of every good prophet of our time: Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela, Maya Angelou, Ruth Bader Ginsburg – all given difficult messages to convey which required courage above all else. None derived great joy in taking on the powers that be, but they knew they were called and so they answered, "Here I am." Samuel tries to find a way around telling Eli but Eli will have none of it. He is to hear the message, no matter what it is. So it comes to pass that the boy Eli counted on to be his eyes shows Eli the fiery vision of his own destruction.

Now if that is what happens when you answer voices in the night, then thanks very much I would just as soon walk the dog. Does anyone really want to hear the living God? I wonder which is worse – to hear it or not to hear it, to face fainting at the power of it or to live oblivious to it? I agree with Barbara Brown Taylor, who claims that sometimes in the middle of the night, all the anxiety over the bills, health, family, universe, are simply diversions to worry about, so that we don't have to say, "Speak, Master, for your servant is listening." I am so afraid that I will hear something, or that I won't. But all the evidence points towards hearing something, at least eventually, which will lead to a turning around. A few weeks ago, I was talking to a friend who had lost her voice and had to speak in whispers. Being hard of hearing, listening to whispers can be a real struggle for me. It took a lot of energy for me to lean forward and listen intently so that I could hear. I began to wonder if this is what it is like to listen to our God who often speaks in whispers. Leaning in and paying attention to a God of whispers takes a great deal of focus. When our minds are cluttered with worries, activities,

thoughts, and diversions, we are far more likely to say, "Listen, Master, for your servant is speaking" than the other way around. If and when we choose to hear, Samuel's story reminds us it is not a journey for the faint-hearted, yet it is an invitation we have all been issued just the same. Hebrews says, "See that you do not refuse to hear the voice that speaks." The truth is that it is a voice that is speaking to us always, sometimes in whispers, other times in loud proclamations, sometimes through others, other times alone in the night. What is God, trying, wanting, longing to say to us? God's message is different for each of us, as different as our lives. Only our beginnings are the same, those first steps we take towards finding out. We reach that turning point when we summon all our courage, open our mouths, and say the words, "Speak, Master, for your servant is listening." Thanks be to God.