

November 26, 2023

Rev. Thandiwe Dale-Ferguson "Here I Am"

First Congregational Church Loveland UCC

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

Will you pray with me? Holy God, open our hearts, our minds, all of our senses to you. Open our hearts, our minds, all of our senses to those who help us recognize your presence right here around us, among us, and within us. And now may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Darkness has settled on the land, yet the lamp of the Lord still flickers, not yet burnt out. Elderly Eli, disabled from loss of sight, disheartened by his sons' debauchery, perhaps dismayed by his own limitations, tosses in his sleep, his old bones never quite comfortable.

Samuel, maybe twelve now, lies asleep in the temple's inner sanctum. The tunic his mother brought for him at her last visit is carefully laid out beside his sleeping mat. Samuel knows his parents only from their annual visits, but his mother tells him the story of his conception and birth each year -- "I was infertile, heartbroken, despairing, and then God gave me you. So I have given you back to God."

Samuel understands this thinking -- after all, everything we have is from God: food, clothing, shelter, our bodies and minds, spirits and talents. Of course his mother dedicated him to the Lord. Anyway, Samuel cannot imagine another life. He is here to serve God in whatever mundane or sacred task needs doing. He is here to assist Eli, the elderly temple priest, Samuel's only real family. So when Samuel hears his name, he jumps up, calls out, and is halfway to Eli's bedroll before he is even fully awake.

"Here I am!"

"I didn't call you. Go back to bed."

We know the story. Two more times this happens. And devoted obedient Samuel jumps up each time. I'm pretty sure by time number three I'd either be mad at Eli or I'd figure it was all in my head.

Two more times Samuel awakens Eli. And Eli must love the boy, because only love keeps us from snapping at our child, grandchild or pet after not one, not two but three late-night wake-ups.

I can't help but wonder: what does Eli feel when he realizes what's happening? Is he jealous that God calls Samuel and not him? Does he worry about what God might say? Does Eli contemplate **not** telling Samuel whose voice is calling in the night: "You're dreaming, hearing voices. Ignore them. Just go to sleep."

Most of us have some experience with people who want to keep all the power for themselves: whether out of greed, hunger for control, or simple insecurity. We've met people who are unwilling to empower others, threatened others' gifts, afraid that someone will outshine them. Is Eli tempted to derail this conversation between God and Samuel? To cling to his role and authority by whatever means necessary? Or is he the kind of mentor who feels proud to know that God has recognized Samuel's goodness?

We don't know. Scripture does not tell us. It leaves lots of gaps in the story. But it does tell us that three times Samuel gets up and runs to the priest's bedside. It does tell us that Eli discerns. While his sight may be failing, while he is not the one who hears God's voice, still the old priest recognizes God at work. Scripture does tell us that Eli advises Samuel. That Eli empowers this young temple servant to speak to God.

Scripture tells us that God persists. That God is close. Present. Surely it was faith in God's nearness and presence that moved Jesuit priest Dan Schutte, sitting at his desk, guitar beside him and blank staff paper in front of him, to ask: "God, if I'm going to do this for my friend, you're going to have to help me." I can't help but wonder: does Eli offer such a prayer? "God, if I'm going to do this for Samuel, you're going to have to help me."

With what do we need God's help? With what do YOU need God's help? God's beloved, it may seem that the word of the Lord is rare in these days. That visions are not widespread. And yet we proclaim that God IS STILL SPEAKING. That God is not done with us yet. That God is doing a new thing. That God is persistent and present. That the God of promise and invitation is calling us, calling you.

And so, let me close with poet Andrew King's words¹:

Samuel on his bed beside the lamp,
its flame describing in slow pulses
the flickering hope
of a lonely, quiet yearning;
the hollow stillness
like a silent pond where
a searching voice could be heard
like a dropping pebble.

And in the dark and in the emptiness
the One who is doing the calling,
the One whose heart is searching,
is the unheard God.

You and me on our beds,
our couches, you and me by our lamps.
You and me under spreading trees,
or peering at the sky through windows;
you and me at our [school or] office desks,
fingering the plastic of keyboards;
you and me in our living-rooms,
or sitting at our kitchen tables;
you and me, so yearning for hope,
so longing for meaning, truth, or joy –
may we become aware of the One
who is searching for us; awake to the One
who knows and calls our names
longing for us to listen:
the God of promise and of invitation.

And so my prayer for us as we enter this Advent season, my prayer for you, is that as you are yearning for hope, for meaning, for truth or joy, you may become aware of the One who is searching for you. You may awaken to the One who knows and calls YOUR name, the One who longs for you to listen: the God of promise and invitation.

May you be open to the discernment and wisdom of those around you. May you share your discernment and wisdom with others. And when you become aware of God's call, may you have the courage to ask for God's help. May you be emboldened to answer: "Here I am!" Amen.

¹ Andrew King, "The One Whose Heart is Searching"

<https://earth2earth.wordpress.com/2015/01/12/poem-for-the-sunday-lectionary-epiphany-2-yr-b/>.