

1/15/12 Speak Lord Your Servant Is Listening
 Mary Bea Sullivan at Grace Episcopal Church, Cullman, AL
 1 Samuel 3:1-10 PS 139 1-5,12-17, 1 cor 6:12-20, John 1:43-51

"When God disturbs you, breaks into your life — just when everything seemed nice and comfortable — be thankful — for that is God's Epiphany to you." writes Br. Geoffrey Tristan

I imagine Samuel and Eli were a bit disturbed by the events that fateful evening long ago. Imagine, young Samuel, probably 10-12 years old, curled up asleep when he hears his name called in the night. "Samuel! Samuel!" He runs to Eli--the temple priest in whose care his mother Hannah had left him soon after Samuel had been weaned. You see, Hannah had been barren and Samuel was an answer to her prayer. Hannah had promised God she would return her son to God if God would only open her womb. And God did--Samuel was the first of six children borne to Hannah.

Now Eli, he was old and things were not going so well for him. His sons had been desecrating the temple and destroying the honor of the priesthood. Eli was becoming blind-spiritually as well as physically. Imagine each in their rooms in the temple--young Samuel an answer to prayer, curled up keeping watch over the ark of the covenant, and old Eli asleep---in another.

Samuel hears his name called. "Samuel! Samuel!" "Here I am!" He obediently responds...who knows how many nights before this one old Eli had called to him for help? I imagine Samuel to be like the parent of a newborn, reflexively responding to that cry, or the caregiver for an elderly parent instinctively running to help.

But it wasn't Eli who called was it? Samuel and Eli danced their "Here I am" "Go back to bed" dance three times before Eli was able to discern the truth. Some say if Eli was more spiritually connected, he would've known God's call for Samuel the FIRST time. Perhaps that is true. But eventually, Eli figures it out. This is BIG. He tells Samuel, this calling, it is from God. Go back to bed, and when you hear your name called answer, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening."

One thing I have been wondering is, HOW DO WE INVITE GOD'S PRESENCE IN OUR LIVES SO THAT WE ARE CAPABLE OF LISTENING TO GOD'S CALL FOR OURSELVES AND FOR EACH OTHER?

Author Esther De Waal writes, "In the complexity of my own daily schedule, with all its demands, I am reminded that it is important, and more than that, fundamental and essential, to keep clear, open space in my own heart. This means that in spite of all the demands, the distractions and the difficulties that besiege my time, I shall try to carry a heart of stillness."

De Waal encourages us to simply allow ourselves "to be drawn uncluttered into the orbit of God." OH I LONG FOR THAT, A HEART OF STILLNESS UNCLUTTERED INTO THE ORBIT OF GOD.

I understand that last fall Phil led a class on taking Sabbath. In just a few months Bob, Kay, and in essence the entire parish will be given the gift of renewal through the generous Lilly foundation funding. This is a wonderful opportunity for the life of this church. We will be given a chance to consider new ways for being a pastoral presence for one another; to re-envision our own spiritual needs.

What a gift to have a season of listening. How can we continue to create an environment that is Spirit inspired, and life-giving for Bob, the church, and the greater community for many years to come?

This is an opportunity to offer ourselves like little Samuel and say--individually and corporately, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening."

Might we agree that taking and encouraging time to cultivate a heart of stillness is critical to our being able to listen for God's voice in our individual and community life? I think sometimes we feel guilty about taking time to be still. My experience is many of us are uncomfortable with silence. We fill our lives with words and noise and work and fun--all of which is important.

But at some point, we do a violence to ourselves and dishonor the gift of life we have been given. Cultivating a heart of stillness is not just for personal renewal, it is conducive to allowing GOD to break into the busyness of our lives. It helps to ensure we are living in accordance with love.

Sr. Joan Chittester has a beautiful saying about our being "co-creators" with God. Chittester infers that God will always be creating. Here's the question-Do we want to participate? If so, wouldn't we do well to make space... To listen...?

Perhaps we could start each morning by lighting a candle, sitting in silence and whispering from the depths of our soul...SPEAK LORD, YOUR SERVANT IS LISTENING. Or, claim radio-free, phone-free time in our cars.

What gifts would we give our children if we encouraged them to invite silence with God? You may remember Fisher Humphries who spoke here a few Lents ago. His wife Caroline has taught their three young granddaughters contemplative prayer. They light a candle and sit in silence for 2-3 minutes, inviting God's presence and action within. "Frequently," Caroline says, "they want to sit for longer."

Some of you are aware of the Wisdom Circles that I have facilitated--in fact many of you have participated in them. I believe one of the unique beauties of the wisdom circle format is that we agree to listen devoutly to one another. The guidelines are very simple

- Only one person may speak at a time.
- When it is your turn to speak, speak from the heart

- listen with your whole being, without judging, fixing or commenting on another's story; and don't think about what you will say when it is your turn.

Participating in a wisdom circle is a rare practice of presence in a world where multi-tasking is mistakenly admired. I have been amazed at the buried truths which have surfaced for me and for others when we hold this sacred space for one another. There have been times when, like a star on the canvas of a dark sky, Spirit breaks through to light the path.

We are at an interesting time in the life of our church and this community. Just 8 months ago tornadoes blew away our illusion that things would always be as they had been. I don't know about you, but I was very afraid that day and the days that followed. Our family was fortunate, our home received no damage and we were not physically harmed. But many of you in this room cannot say the same. There has been pain and loss. And there has been rebuilding and reaching out. We are all forever changed.

Bob and I were talking the other day and he said, "in many ways, these empty lots are even sadder than the remnants of the homes that used to stand on them. I wonder," Bob said, "what in us, what in me, is uncomfortable with this emptiness?"

Reflecting on those empty lots, I was reminded of an experience I had in Yellowstone in the spring of 1989. The previous fall Yellowstone had experienced what was and continues to be, the largest wildfire in its history, a staggering 794,000 acres were affected by the fires. I had worked in Yellowstone 4 years prior, and the change was dramatic. Previously timber-lined trails were wiped clear except for charred remains of trees and to my great surprise and joy-wildflowers...benefitting from their new-found light, the phlox, foxglove, and many other species of plants abundantly carpeted the darkened soil. Locals attested to the 1989 wildflower season as one of the best they had ever seen. But in-between the fires and flowers, was an empty winter--one in which seeds stirred unseen.

What seeds are stirring in us? Here we stand, 8 months out from the tornadoes and 3 months from Bob and Kay and the parishes' sabbatical. How do we open ourselves to fully participate in the new God is always creating? HOW DO WE make SPACE? Can we embrace the emptiness?

The truth is, even if we say, "Speak Lord your servant is listening" we may not hear anything in that moment. However, let us not underestimate the power of the receptivity and humble surrender that comes from uttering this simple phrase.

We might say, "Speak Lord your servant is listening" and not like what we hear. We might be disturbed. We might be challenged to see things, or people, or our ourselves in a new way.

Think about it, Eli had to believe Samuel was more than a small boy--he had to see him as God's messenger. Nathanael, "Nazareth, can anything good come from there?" Nathanael, well he had to let go of his prejudice in order to see and follow Christ, didn't he?

What are you and I being asked to see/experience anew?

One of my favorite professors is Roger Ferlo. A New Yorker, Roger knows about rebuilding from tragedy. He was rector of Church of St. Luke in the Fields in Greenwich Village during 911.

It is informed by this experience that Roger contends, "the Scriptures insist that this God who calls us by name, this God we cannot see and control, this God who knows our every weakness, this same God will settle for nothing less than our giving God everything we have, everything we are. For the sake of others, for the sake of love."

Like little Samuel, we are All called, God is calling us by name---Sarah, JoAnne, Jim, Tammy, Doyle, ...

We are ALL called-by the One who searches and knows us, by the One who knit us in our mothers' wombs

We are ALL called... To be God's presence.

Will we be like Samuel, and Abraham and Moses before him responding, "Here I am?"

You and I both know the world is *aching*, crying out for God's light to shine through the cracks. Some of us in this sanctuary are tired, scared, lonely. Most of us don't hear God's voice in the night or see Christ walking before us. But God is no less present today than God was in Samuel or Nathanael's days. It is up to us to offer ourselves each moment of each day. To be open. To listen.

Let us cultivate listening hearts drawn uncluttered into the orbit of God.

Let us respond like Samuel, "Here I am! Speak Lord your servant is listening."

Take a moment...comfortable close your eyes...don't have to, an invitation ...lift your heart to God, let us say together 3 times,

"Speak Lord your servant is listening."

Silence....

AMEN