

June 17, 2018

Which Voice Shall I Follow?

READ: 1 Samuel 3:6 (Common English Bible)

“Again the Lord called Samuel, so Samuel got up, went to Eli, and said, ‘I’m here. You called me?’”

REFLECT:

Here is a startling story of a young boy named Samuel who had trouble sleeping one night because of a voice that spoke to him from the darkness. Most of us know that story – a voice that comes to us in the darkness at that moment when we want nothing more than to sleep. The volume of the voice is usually immense. It is a clamorous tongue that disturbs the mind and stirs physical restlessness as we lay upon the mattress. For some, the voice that speaks addresses our personal finances, most often when our financial resources are running low and our commitments are racing in the opposite direction. For others, the voice reminds us of estranged relationships but offers no solutions for healing. Other voices that bombard the mind’s ear simply wish to generate anger at this or that political party and the absolute stupidity – or cruelty – of this or that policy out of Washington. Solutions rarely show-up in the darkness of the bedroom. Neither does sound sleep.

Here, young Samuel is lying down in the Lord’s temple. We know it is the night hour because fifteen verses later we are informed, “Samuel lay there until morning.” But Samuel will not sleep that night. Before his mind drifts off to restful sleep, Samuel hears a voice. It is the Lord’s voice but Samuel doesn’t know that – not in the beginning. He believes the voice belongs to his mentor, Eli. Three times Samuel hears the voice and three times Samuel disturbs Eli to inquire what it is Eli wants. It is the third time that Eli grows suspicious that this is more than Samuel’s imagination. Nor is Samuel simply hearing the whistle of the wind. Samuel is instructed to make inquiry if he hears the voice again; to say, “Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening.” And the voice does return.

This is precisely the point that Samuel makes a rather dramatic shift from simply jumping from his bed at the sound of a voice to careful listening. Samuel restrains his natural impulse to a quick response and practices alert and intentional discernment of the content of the voice that speaks. There is much all of us can learn from this simple act – pausing long enough to sincerely listen to the voice we hear, particularly if that voice is unsettling to us. What would happen in our nation if Republicans and Democrats were to exercise restraint from the vitriolic impulse they have for one another? Imagine the surprise if Evangelicals and liberals in the Christian church ever truly listened to one another. What might any of us discover in the darkness of the night if we calmly listened to all that unsettles us – personal finances, relationship difficulties, or concern for the health of those we love – and then, rather uncommonly, invited another voice to the conversation, “Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening.”

At any moment of the day or night there are voices that clamor for our attention. Some voices long for an impulsive response from us, usually a response that multiplies anger and hurt and fears among those we know and love. Perhaps a voice asks from us indignation and puerile criticism of another point of view. The only contribution that voice makes is increased brokenness in an already broken world. Do not trust these voices. But Samuel’s story shows us another way. Eli counsels Samuel to “listen” rather than “jump” at the sound of the voice. If we listen, and listen with humility and civility and respect, what we will discover is that the voices that clamor for an impulsive response will scatter and one will remain. It will be the loveliest voice of all. It will be a voice that asks patience and love. Trust that voice. Ponder it. Respond to it. It will be then that you have in your heart neither doubt nor fear.

