

Here I am, Where are You?

1 Samuel 3:1-20

By Rev. Jessica Gregory

It had been one of those days when things just didn't go as I'd planned. My car battery died and attending to that resulted in everything else on the day's schedule getting pushed back, including going to the grocery store. I managed to get there, but didn't have enough time to get all of my groceries and got home late, making the nanny stay longer than usual. Ryan wasn't home yet so I was unpacking groceries frantically while trying to get dinner started and take care of the boys. Being two on one at our house is never good when it's the two boys and one parent! Nathan was hovering around in the kitchen peering into grocery bags looking for foods he wanted to sample right then—no matter that I was starting dinner. Peter was screaming from his highchair, wanting both attention and food. I was frazzled from the events of the day and found it incredibly difficult to make the grilled cheese sandwiches with all the chaos surrounding me. I was overwhelmed with distractions. And so in the midst of it all, I took a break from putting the cheddar cheese on the buttered bread, closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Peter's loud chirping and Nathan's questions and hovering became more distant, as I found a quiet place within, a space in which I was centered, in which God was present. For all of ninety seconds I stayed in that place. When I returned to my dinner-making task I felt a new calm wash over me, despite the consistent noise surrounding me.

Where we are parents or not, raising young children or have had an empty nest for some time, each of us has had one of these days; a day when you feel so out of control and bombarded with distraction that is challenging to think straight. In this world of cellular phones that keep us in touch all the time we are so often hearing beeps or dings or rings. These sounds can indicate any number of things- we have new email, or a text or have an appointment coming up. These days we have the opportunity to receive up to date news and info immediately but we also have the burden of constantly being distracted by these beeps and dings and rings.

For the young Samuel in our passage, servant of the priest Eli, distractions took a very different form. His days were filled with tasks to do for the priest and journeys to take but at night- in the time before electricity and cellular phones- the distractions were few; especially for a child. Our story begins with Samuel in a quiet, sacred place described as the temple of God. This is not THE temple of God, because David has not yet reigned to build it, but it was probably a shrine or temple of some sort. Samuel is in this holy place in which the ark of God, or God's presence lived. In is in *this* place, distraction free, that God calls to Samuel. Samuel is able to hear God clearly, even though he assumes that it is the priest Eli who calls him. Scripture states that the word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread. We have to wonder, if God does not speak often, why he would choose to call to a boy who did not even know him. One reason may be that, while Samuel did not know who was calling, he heard the call clearly and responded immediately and with enthusiasm.

This past fall I had the opportunity to craft a Children's chapel communion service, held in St. Andrew's chapel on the first Sunday of Advent. This service's congregation was NPC's children and teachers and its

worship leaders were the Junior High youth. Our Youth Director, Nick Ralston and the Junior high teachers prepared the youth for their leadership roles. The youth led almost every aspect of this service, including communion. While it is customary at Northminster for church officers to serve the elements of bread and cup, this is not a rule of the PCUSA. In fact, any person may do the serving, with the approval of the church's Session. For this service seventh grader Nicholas Antonoglu and his fourth-grade sister Julie shared the communion prayers with me and served the bread and grape juice to their peers. The children came forward quietly, recognizing the sacredness of the moment, and received the sacrament through which they experienced God's love for them: Simple theology, simple foods, profound meaning. Throughout the entire service the presence of the Holy Spirit was palpable. The chapel felt alive and joyfilled. Children's hearts are easily opened to God. They accept, without questions or qualifications that they are God's beloved and hear as truth the Psalmist's assertion: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well" (Psalm 139: 13-14). The readiness of the children to receive communion reminds me of the readiness of Samuel to answer the call placed upon him as heard in his response to God: "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10).

From his birth, Samuel was a servant of the Lord. The first born of Hannah, Samuel was much longed for, prayed for and awaited for by his mom and was seen as a gift from the Creator. Out of gratitude for this child Hannah gives her son back to God, to be set apart to serve the Lord.

While none of us has this story of being set apart each of us has a unique yet shared story of our baptisms. In this sacrament we are claimed by God as part of God's family. We are cleansed by the water and the Holy Spirit; we made new creations not by anything we do but by the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. New Creations claimed by God to live as Christians in this world; serving God and one another. Baptism is our gift but also our responsibility. We are responsible to share the light of God's love into the darkness of our world. We are responsible to live out our faith in concrete ways of caregiving. We are responsible to support one another, our fellow Christians, in this task. Part of this support is being a vessel through which God can speak.

Eli was not only Samuel's master and father figure for him, he was also his spiritual guide. It is Eli's knowledge of the Lord that enables Samuel to respond to God's call. Eli, who has been worn down by a life of leadership and disappointment has little vision left. His eyesight had begun to grow dim. Samuel offers him a vision of the world as he sees it, one of clarity and much light, one with hope for the future. It is through this mutual relationship of trust, respect and love that God is heard.

One of the unique and wonderful gifts of church community is the opportunity to develop relationships of faith with people outside one's family. The confirmation class mentor experience is a great example. At the beginning of the year a confirmand (an eighth or ninth grader) is paired with a mentor. This person is an involved church member who is not the youth's parent and who often times doesn't know the youth well before this experience. From October until confirmation on Pentecost Sunday the confirmand and the mentor journey through faith exploration together. In class discussions they talk about big theological issues such as the Trinity, and Sin and Predestination as well their personal

experiences of faith and their questions about God. The mentors and confirmands together grapple with questions of faith and doubt and in this midst of this dialogue form deep relationships with each other. In the spring, with these relationships formed, the mentors offer guidance, affirmation and support to the confirmands as they articulate their faith in a written statement and share that with the elders of the church.

If we are lucky, each of us has had a mentor whose guidance and support gave us the affirmation we needed to grow closer to God and better able to answer God's calls on our lives. The Rev. Keith Harris was such a mentor to me. Keith and I first met at a youth event for the Synod of Mid-America when I was twelve. I experienced him as pastor as he led worship, energizers (ice-breakers with crazy moves to pop songs) and Bible Study. He served a church in Kansas so I didn't seem him often; only at these Synod gatherings. But Keith kept popping into my life. I saw him again during my college years when I was a camp counselor in the summer at Heartland Presbyterian Camp and Retreat Center outside Kansas City, Missouri. He would bring his youth for overnight camp. Our paths crossed a third time when I was young adult attending Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago. Keith was the Associate Pastor for Youth and worked with me as I served as one of the confirmation class teachers. Keith experienced me at three distinct times in my life and observed how I lived out my faith. For this reason, when over coffee at Starbucks Keith affirmed my ministry gifts and suggested I think about seminary, even though I was enjoying teaching high school, I listened. I didn't apply to go to McCormick the next day but did begin to seriously discern if that might be God's call for me. God speaks through people in our lives and God's people help us to hear God's calls to us.

The challenge for us is to quiet the internal and external noise- those endless distractions- that add static to the calls and make them impossible to understand. So much noise! The internal thoughts of the endless to do lists...I must return those emails...when was that event again?...Must call mom, it's been weeks...the kitchen sink drip needs to be fixed...what are we going to have for dinner tonight? And the internal worries that fester...what is the biopsy is positive? What then? If he falls again we'll have to move, and where will we go?...My department is getting smaller and smaller...what if I am let go next? He seems so distant lately, is our marriage okay? The questions can go forever.

Like Samuel did that night in the temple of God we too must find a sacred place to be—even if it's a noisy kitchen for just a couple minutes! We need to put ourselves in a place where we can be fully aware of the presence of God. We need to find the quiet center in our lives not just here in the Sanctuary on Sunday morning but anywhere, anytime. As Christians we believe the Holy Spirit is God within us, and surrounding us. God amid the distractions of our life. How do we separate God from the other? By finding that quiet space and focusing our mind. We need not begin to pray with words, which can be frustrating and pressure-filled. Breathing works just as well. The breath prayer on the front of your bulletin is an excellent example of words we can use to get to your center. By asking God to descend upon your heart you are opening your heart to the Spirit's moving and to God's calling. You are intentionally removing yourself from the cacophony of your world and entering the calm of God's presence. God calls for each of us at different times...and calls repeatedly. Samuel's story assures us of God's persistence! If we remain persistent and open to God's voice in our lives, whether though quiet

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time or talking to a trusted mentor the answer to our question of God- where are you?? Will be heard and you will hear the response: I am here. Thanks be to God. Amen.