

## *Are You Listening?*

*For the children:*

Do you ever take a nap? How long do you sleep?  
What about at night, do you sleep at night?

You know, sleep is important for our bodies. God made us so that we can run and play in the daytime, but our bodies also need rest. Sometimes that means we take a nap, but always it means we go to bed at night so our bodies can rest.

But how do you know when it's time to wake up?  
Who wakes you up?

Our scripture today tells the story of a boy who was sleeping when he heard God calling his name! I'm going to guess if God called your name while you were asleep, you would wake up!

And you know what the boy said? He said, "Speak, Lord, I am listening." It's a good reminder to us, to always be ready to listen.

Let's pray:

*Help us to listen, God. Help us listen to our parents so we can learn how to listen to you. Amen.*

Now the boy Samuel was serving the Lord under Eli. The Lord's word was rare at that time, and visions weren't widely known. One day Eli, whose eyes had grown so weak he was unable to see, was lying down in his room. God's lamp hadn't gone out yet, and Samuel was lying down in the Lord's temple, where God's chest was. The Lord called to Samuel. "I'm here," he said. Samuel hurried to Eli and said, "I'm here. You called me?" "I didn't call you," Eli replied. "Go lie down." So he did. Again the Lord called Samuel, so Samuel got up, went to Eli, and said, "I'm here. You called me?" "I didn't call, my son," Eli replied. "Go and lie down." (Now Samuel didn't yet know the Lord, and the Lord's word hadn't yet been revealed to him.)

A third time the Lord called Samuel. He got up, went to Eli, and said, "I'm here. You called me?" Then Eli realized that it was the Lord who was calling the boy. So Eli said to Samuel, "Go and lie down. If he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down where he'd been. Then the Lord came and stood there, calling just as before, "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel said, "Speak. Your servant is listening."

1 Sam. 3:1-10 (C.E.B.)

*For the adults:*

Some of us are light sleepers and wake to the slightest noise. Others sleep so soundly, it seems the horn of a semi-truck can't rouse them. I'm not sure which better describes you, but I wonder, what kinds of things wake you up?

- When the power goes out while I'm asleep, it's the absence of noise that wakes me. The air conditioning fan stops turning, for example. Or maybe it's not the sound at all, maybe it's the streetlight that stops shining into the room and it suddenly gets darker.
- There have been times when a dream woke me.

- And there have been times when a change in temperature woke me – either I was too cold or I was too hot.
- When we had kids living at home, I was more attuned to the sounds of their breathing. I would get up to check on them if I thought I heard something awry.
- And when I was a volunteer firefighter, I learned to quickly respond whenever I heard the sound of a fire whistle.

Those are some of the things that wake me up at night.

As I was reading and reflecting on our text for this morning, I not only wondered how soundly Eli slept, I also wondered what kinds of things would wake him up. Like many of you, I tend to rely on an alarm clock – although most mornings I wake up before it goes off. And I know some people who wake up to the sound of the radio.

Eli had neither of those options. I am certain that some people in that era woke to the sound of the birds singing at sunrise – or roosters crowing, if those were nearby. I suppose it could be that someone was tasked with staying up through the night. I don't know.

Whatever your preferred method of waking up may be, not many of us begin the day by responding to the sound of our name being whispered.

Although I do remember one time when one of our kids was trying to wake me without waking up Ronda. He whispered my name. I felt his presence more than I heard his words, however. He leaned in close and I felt his breath and opened my eyes.

And it startled me.

From that experience, I realize that if Samuel had been my son, I probably wouldn't have been as patient as Eli was – especially not after the third time I'd told him to go back to bed (1 Sam. 3:5, 7, 9)!

But Eli wasn't his father. He was his teacher. He didn't see it at first, but eventually he saw this as a "teaching moment" (1 Sam. 3:9)

You might remember that when Samuel was born his mother thought it was a miracle. Hannah had prayed and prayed and prayed for a son. In one of her prayers, she promised God that if she ever had a son, she would let him be raised in the temple by the priest (1 Sam. 1:11).

I don't recommend that kind of prayer, by the way, although I've heard other people try to bargain with God and make promises that are hard to keep.

But when Samuel was born, his mother kept her promise. And Samuel was raised by the priest, Eli (1 Sam.1:28). As I said, he wasn't his father, he was his teacher, his mentor. And in our text for today, he teaches Samuel how to hear and how to respond to the voice of God.

For years I thought this story was perfect for young people to hear about the importance of listening to God. I thought it was a reminder to all of us that sometimes we need other people to help us learn how to respond to God's voice.

I know that was true in my own life. I was called to the ministry long before I realized it was God calling me. It took my friends and my family and people from my church and co-workers to help me hear God speaking to me. I could go into detail, but as I read this text this week, I recognized something else going on.

You see, in many ways this passage is more of a footnote or an interlude in the story of Eli. It isn't necessarily about Samuel.

And maybe I came to that conclusion because in many ways, I am much closer to Eli's age than I am to Samuel's. And that's true for about half of the people in this room, by the way. Eli's story reminds us to focus on those who need help determining their vocation, to discern God's call in their lives. It is about how to be a mentor and help someone else hear and respond to God's voice.

This text is not just about Samuel responding to God's voice, it also about Eli, who serves as a mentor. It is about the role of those who are now mentors to younger people as they learn to take on the roles and responsibilities we once held.

And let me repeat an observation I made early on in my tenure as your Interim Pastor. This church – as a whole – has been doing a remarkable job of making the transition of leadership from one generation to another. I say that as a pastor who saw too many churches struggle with that, and all too often fail at that. I have seen how a failure to pass the baton properly can lead to the decline and eventual death of a congregation.

In one church I served, for example, I kept hearing a request for younger people to participate. But planning meetings were always held in the middle of the week, in the middle of the day, making it hard for younger people to be present.

When I helped them realize the futility of that, we moved the meetings to the evening. Then I found some younger people willing to join us. Three different ones, in fact, who each told me the same thing when they stopped coming.

“I'm tired of being told my ideas won't work.”

I can't say that I've seen that happen here. In fact, I think you're doing a great job of helping the next generation take on the work of the church.

Eli's story, however, invites us to consider how we can do that better.

The people in our congregation who are on the search committee have realized that one of the dilemmas is that there are so few candidates to choose from. So maybe we need to be like Eli and look around us to see people who might be called to the pastoral ministry. Young people, perhaps, but maybe someone we know who has gifts that are being underutilized in their current line of work.

How can we be like Eli who hears people asking for more meaningful work and directing them toward something that may alleviate a denominational shortage of pastoral candidates? And by the way, it isn't just a Mennonite crisis of leadership. I can tell you about the demographic reasons we are experiencing a shortage of pastoral candidates across several denominations.

My point is, perhaps we need to take a cue from Eli and start looking more carefully, listening more intently, paying attention to where God is trying to speak but is not being heard.

It might not make a difference in the short term, but it might help us the next time we need to search for a new pastor.

And while I'm at it, let me tell you about an observation made at the Justice Together Nehemiah Assembly a couple of weeks ago. One of the specific requests was to increase the number of mental health

resources in our community. To which one of the officials acknowledged that part of the issue is a dearth of professionals to fill the positions.

Maybe we need to be like Eli and help others recognize the whisper of the spirit who is luring people into the mental health profession, as well as pastoral ministry.

So how does Eli do that with Samuel?

Well, he begins by giving Samuel simple chores. We know that because Samuel is assigned to watch the flame, to make sure the fire does not go out (1 Sam. 3:3). In churches, we can do that by asking young children to help hand out bulletins or greet people at the door. We can invite older children to read the scripture. We can find roles and places for them to assist, and when they respond positively, we can nurture that desire with additional tasks and opportunities.

I know, for example, that I started singing in the choir when I was still in Junior High School. I couldn't carry a tune, but I learned by singing next to Pete. I sang whatever he sang. And if he was right, I was right – and if he was on the wrong note – well, so was I.

The other thing Eli does is to pay attention to what else is going on. Admittedly, he is slow to recognize it, but eventually he realizes that God is speaking to Samuel – even if Samuel doesn't know it yet. So he coaches him, giving him the words to speak when God's voice is heard again (1 Sam. 3:9).

In a conversation with my brother a few years ago, he told me a high school teacher of ours was disappointed when Kelly didn't go to college to become an engineer. But Kelly didn't know what an engineer does. Now that he is retired, he realizes he would have loved being an engineer. He didn't know what he didn't know, and he didn't know to ask, either.

Sometimes we need to be invited to explore a career path that we might not otherwise consider. So, for example, if you know a young person who has a natural ability to listen well, suggest a career in the mental health profession. If they express a compassion for people, help them see the possibility of pastoral ministry.

Especially for women who may not have seen female role models, it can be liberating to hear someone suggest she can channel her gifts and become a pastor. As mentors, it is our task to help them try it out and see if it fits.

Eli served as Samuel's mentor. And there are many of us who can take on the role of mentor as well.

When we do that work, God can raise up Samuel's in our midst.

And that will help us all sleep better at night.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

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