

JOHN 1:43-51 (p. 861)

JANUARY 17, 2021

1 SAMUEL 3:1-10 (p. 215)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

We are here Lord, awaiting a Word from you. Like Philip and Nathanael, like young Samuel in the Temple, we long to hear, and discern, your still, quiet Voice—to separate your Voice, from all of the other voices that compete for our attention. So, please speak Lord, for your servants are listening. In Jesus’ Name we ask this, Amen!

“CALLED”

I love Samuel! He was a real “Mover and Shaker”! He did all kinds of things to further the Kingdom of God! He anointed Saul, the first king of Israel! And then later David, the Giant Killer! Scholars tell us that he was the very Last Judge of Ancient Israel, as well as the First Prophet since the time of Moses! That’s some powerful “firsts” and “lasts”, don’t you think? And here he is, at the age of eleven, according to the First Century Historian Josephus, serving in the Temple and boldly saying “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening”! What a powerful declaration of Faith! “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening”! It’s eloquent, and simple! And a great lesson for us!

So, do you think we are? Listening, I mean. Have you ever made that particular request, or one like it? More to the point, meant it when you did? Could you, in all honesty, say it now? Are you listening, with your ears open, your heart open? Does God have your full attention, your total and complete, undivided attention? What I’m asking is, if the Lord should speak to you, right now, are you in a place where you can hear? “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening”!

Here we are on the edge of a new beginning! It's a brand-new year! 2021 "looms large" before us! We are back at in-person Worship! COVID vaccines are rolling out all around the country, around the world in fact! It's not Spring, by any wild stretch of the imagination! But it feels as if new life is blossoming. blooming right before our eyes! Some of us have made New Year's Resolutions too, some of which will require radical change! This is the "First Day of the Rest of our Life", and we are no longer satisfied with the "status quo", with "Business as Usual"! It's time to move on and move up, right!

But have we included our Spiritual Life in all of this planning? That's the question, isn't it? Are we seriously determined to make God first, to really listen to what He has to say? What do you think? Let me put it another way. When the Lord speaks, does he have an audience? Can we discern what He is saying, not just what we want to hear? Are we even close to where young Samuel is? Because if not, how do we get there from here? "Speak Lord, for you servants are listening"!

You know, listening may be the single most important thing we do. In a relationship, in any interaction really, it makes all the difference in the world! Remember that lady down in Dallas recently, who answered a knock at her door, only to discover a rather disheveled man enquiring about work? He had lost his job during the shut downs. But he had a family to feed, and was willing to do almost anything to raise some money. The woman was touched! And quite frankly, impressed with his willingness to work! So, she asked him if he could paint.

“Why yes ma’am, I can. I’m actually a pretty good painter”. “Well here,” she said, “take this gallon of green paint and this brush, and go around to the back of the house. You’ll see a porch back there that needs to be repainted. Be very careful though. I don’t want a mess. And when you’re done, I’ll look it over and pay you what it’s worth”. The man was ecstatic!

About two hours later he again knocked on the door. “All finished,” he reported. “Did you do a good job,” the woman asked. “Yes ma’am,” he said. “Come and see. And I used the whole gallon of paint too. But ma’am, I have to tell you, that’s not a Porsche back there. It’s actually a Mercedes”!

Listening is crucial! In any interaction, any relationship, but particularly in an intimate one! Both Eli and Samuel figured that out, at least when the boy lay down for the fourth time!

Prior to that, Samuel was pretty wrapped up in everyday life! He had duties, a to-do list, things other people wanted him to do! Maybe that sounds familiar? Samuel had worked all day in the House of the Lord at Shiloh. He had done what was asked of him, accomplished everything that was expected! Samuel had “ministered before the Lord”, it says, “under the guidance of Eli, his mentor. And he has been doing this “since the time he was weaned”! Which was age 2 or possibly 3 at that time, according to the Historians. Old enough to walk, but only for a year or so. Can you imagine?

I'll bet you can. Most of us try to do what's expected of us too. We work diligently, daily even, often here in the House of the Lord! And most of us find it easy to get all wrapped up in everyday life in the process!

Again, Josephus tells us that Samuel was an adolescent, about eleven at the time. So, he has been serving in the Temple for about eight or nine years. Under the guidance of Eli. Alongside Eli's two sons. And when night came, after what must have been a busy day, Samuel curls up in front of the fire, not "far from the Ark of God"!

I imagine him feeling pretty content, don't you? I mean, he has spent the entire day serving in the House of the Lord! There has to be some satisfaction in that! Or maybe not! Maybe he has had a bad day? That happens, you know. Maybe instead of peaceful, Samuel was irritated when he laid down? Or bored? Or over-worked? Or under extreme stress? Who knows! Maybe someone at Worship that day had done something, or said something that hurt this young boy's feelings? Something was bothering him, enough to still be on his mind. Maybe old Eli had somehow gotten on his nerves? Mentors have a way of doing that, you know, especially Pastors and Priests!

Maybe Eli had been particularly demanding that day, or grumpy? The attitude of those you work with has a lot to do with how you personally feel! Maybe the people who had come to offer sacrifices to the Lord had been exceptionally difficult, or downright rude? That happens too. Maybe Samuel, after a particularly rough day, has curled up in his blankets, near the fire, totally thrilled to finally be alone!

Or maybe, Samuel has spent the whole day distracted, day-dreaming, zoned out, if you will”? Focused on something else entirely? Maybe he has been thinking? Thinking about his mom and dad? Missing them deeply, and wishing he was with them? It wouldn’t be easy living in the Temple, particularly for a young person, let alone since you were a toddler! Maybe Samuel was homesick? Maybe he climbed into bed overwhelmed with loneliness, or some other emotion, fear, or sadness? Maybe he was “troubled in spirit”? But then again, maybe Samuel is feeling content?

In any case, regardless of what he was feeling, Samuel is in the House of the Lord, what we would call Church, spending time in the Presence of God. And he went to find rest, “not far from the Ark of God”, where God’s Presence resides. And even though the “Word of the Lord was rare in those days”, and “there weren’t many visions”, the “Lamp of God had not yet gone out”! I love that! It says a lot! On multiple levels! “The Word of the Lord was rare in those days. There hadn’t been many visions as of late. But the Lamp of God had not yet gone out”.

So, can you relate? You work diligently, often in the House of the Lord. And yet, lately, the Word of the Lord seems a little rare. You find it easy to get all wrapped up in the “stuff” of everyday life, right? You’re easily distracted, emotionally even, spiritually too! So, you crawl into bed pooped, spent, exhausted, maybe lonely!

Suddenly, Samuel heard a voice! “SAMUEL”! Someone was calling him! “It must be Eli,” he thought. “He must need me!” “There must be something that needs to be done!” So, our faithful young “Prophet-To-Be”, leaps to his feet, rubs the sleep from his eyes, and sets off at a run! “Did you call me, master? Do you need me? I am here.” “No, my son. Go back to sleep. You must be dreaming.” And Samuel, ever the dutiful one, returns to his mat.

I picture him tossing and turning a bit now, trying to get comfortable, but eventually drifting off to sleep again. Only to hear that voice calling again! “Eli, did you call me? I am here! What is it that you want?” “No, my son, I didn’t call. Go back to sleep.”

This time I picture Samuel finding it difficult to relax, don’t you? Was Eli playing a joke? Is the old Priest messing with my head? Am I hearing things? Maybe Samuel started to have doubts? Maybe he started questioning Eli, his motives, his sanity? Maybe Samuel is starting to get irritated? I mean, it’s the middle of the night! Tomorrow is going to be a big day! Maybe our future hero is a bit reluctant to close his eyes again?

Or maybe not! Maybe he simply stretched out one more time, tried to be still, quietly listening for that gentle Voice to speak to him again? And after a while, it did. “Surely, Eli, this time you called me?” “No, my son, I did not.”

Now remember, “the Word of the Lord was rare in those days. There had not been very many visions,” sort of like today. And young Samuel, we’re told, “Did not yet know the Lord. The Word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.” He is a faithful servant of God, but one, unfamiliar with the Voice of God. He is completely unaware of the Presence of the Holy Spirit! And yet, he continues to minister before God anyway! Now I know some of you can relate! We see it all the time!

Samuel is faithful, worshipping and praising the Lord, right through what we might call a Spiritual Dry Spell, when God hasn’t exactly been very vocal in a while! Miraculous signs and wonders haven’t been seen in a very long time! And Samuel, does not have a personal relationship with the Lord! At least not yet! There had not been any Epiphanies for the boy. No personal, or even corporate divine revelations! He simply doesn’t know God! He knows “about” God. He just doesn’t, know God! So, when God spoke, Samuel didn’t have a clue who was talking!

I see Samuel as not knowing God, “yet”! Whereas some of us might be at the “used to know God” stage. We have let our relationship slip a bit. We might call it a “Spiritual Desert”, or “Dark Night of the Soul”. We might try to blame it on someone else. I am “not being fed”! When the truth is, we are “not feeding ourself”!

Notice that Samuel is still faithfully serving the Lord anyway, still near to the place where the Lord resides! And notice who initiates the call! Samuel just needed to listen! How many times have we heard that during Advent? Listen! Pay attention! Keep Watch!

And I see parallels in our first reading this morning as well! Nathanael lived in the time of John the Baptist, in Galilee, near the sea. And Prior to John, there hadn't been any Prophetic Word in the land for hundreds and hundreds of years! In fact, since the time of the Prophet Malachi, a little over four hundred years earlier! You might say the "Word of the Lord was rare", and that "there weren't many visions"! Once again God had been rather quiet! And yet Nathanael, like Samuel, continued to believe!

Scripture describes him as being resolute in his devotion and piety to God! Jesus even says, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit"! Nathanael continued to hang onto his Faith—to obey the Law and the Prophets—even in what may have felt like a Spiritual Dry Time for him as well!

Like Samuel, Nathanael was currently lacking a personal relationship with God. And like Samuel, when God spoke to him, Nathanael didn't recognize His voice. At least not at first. He didn't know Jesus yet, so there was no way he could grasp who Jesus really was! Can you feel what it was like to stand in his sandals?

Because now, roughly two thousand years later, it seems as if, once again, the Word of the Lord is pretty rare! There simply aren't many visions these days, are there? At least not many credible ones! God has not been "overtly vocal" lately, has He? Or explicit! And yet, the Lamp of God has not gone out!

You know, I've discovered that one of the keys with successful resolutions, New Year's or otherwise, is to start by making an honest assessment of your current condition. And let's face it, there are a lot of people, both inside as well as outside of the Church, who simply do not have a personal relationship with the Lord! They don't Him! Or don't know Him "yet"! The Word of the Lord has not yet been revealed to them! Or they did know Him, once, maybe long ago, but have now forgotten His Face. They no longer see His smile, or hear His Voice, or recognize it for what it is!

Many continue to minister before the Lord though! Sometimes daily! Sometimes even late into the night! Many go through the motions, perform all the rituals and required routines. Many serve in His house faithfully, and out in His world happily! But His Voice is not that familiar! Some of us don't even know what it sounds like, let alone are able to comprehend the One who is speaking! So, when we hear God calling, we tend to immediately assume that Call, is coming from somewhere else! Why do you think that is?

I have a brand-new Granddaughter, Isabelle Hope, Izzy for short. So, I have been paying attention to "baby things". Did you know that Obstetric Doctors and Nurses say babies recognize their parent's voices at birth? It's true! In fact, studies suggest that this familiarity starts around the seventh month of pregnancy. And in Neo-Natal Intensive Care Units, where babies can't always be with their parents, they actually calm down immediately when mom or dad enters the room and talks to them. It's pretty amazing!

Newborns, whose eyesight is quite fuzzy, can actually see clearly 8 to 14 inches, the exact distance of their mother's face while nursing! And Dr. Alice Sterling Honig of Syracuse University wrote an article in Parenting Magazine stating that 3-day-old infants can actually distinguish the smell of their mother's milk from someone else's! There is just something about being in relationship, isn't there!

Hebrew University in Jerusalem did a study several years ago. Forty-six brand new moms, all of whom had given birth five to seventy-nine hours earlier, were blindfolded and then asked to identify which of three sleeping infants was her own. Seventy-two percent of them correctly chose their own baby the very first time! Most said they knew their child by the texture of the infant's hand, or by the temperature of his or her skin. And since these mothers were not allowed to study their babies beforehand in order to prepare for the experiment, apparently, they learned these identifying characteristics during routine, daily contact. I wonder if there might there be a lesson here?

Psalm 139, one of my wife's favorites, tells us that God knitted us together in our mother's womb, and knows us intimately! God knows the texture of our hand and the temperature of our skin! God knows each one of us better than a mother knows her newborn baby! So here is the question! Are we spending enough time and energy to get to know Him? Are we listening? Would you recognize His voice if He spoke? Would it sound familiar? Do you know it intimately? If so, great! But if not, ask yourself how much effort you are putting into the relationship?

Samuel had help. But then, so do we. God put Eli in his life, a teacher and mentor. Eli wasn't perfect, not by a long sight! In fact, he had a number of issues that God was about to deal with! But when Samuel needed guidance, Eli was there! Eli didn't have all the answers either. He didn't even understand what was going on himself, at least not at first. But then Eli had an Epiphany. "Go back into the Temple," he said. "Go to where the Presence of God resides. Be still Samuel. Spend some quiet-time with the Lord, just listening. Enter the place of Worship son, and pay attention! Be open and receptive to what Almighty God has to say!" And then, when He speaks, respond immediately! Don't hesitate! Don't doddle! Don't get all hung up on the 'how'. Just say, "Speak Lord, for you servant is listening!"

Nathanael had guidance from a mentor too. Philip said, "We have found the one for whom we have been waiting all of our lives." Nathanael, though, didn't recognize the Lord. "Right," he said, "Sure! Go ahead and tell me that the promised Messiah, the One who will redeem us, the One that we have heard about since we were in short pants in Synagogue School, is going to come out of that little burg, Nazareth, way up north!"

Nathanael had doubts! To which Philip responded, "Come and see. Check it for yourself." He invited Nathanael to discover the Good News!

So, think back for a moment. Think about the Philips and the Elis in your life, people who guided you, helped you see and hear the truth? More importantly maybe, ask yourself if you have been a Philip or an Eli for someone else. When have you led others to discover Christ?

That's how it works, you know. John invited Andrew, who then invited Peter, who in turn invited how many others! Jesus invited Philip, who in turn invited Nathanael. Eli mentored Samuel, and Samuel mentored David, the famous and beloved king! Jesus called the Apostles, who then called countless others, including you and me! This invitation thing, this calling to discover, is sort of like a chain letter. The question is, do you want to be the one to break the chain?

I don't think we are doing such a good job of sharing the Good News these days, do you? Maybe that's why the Word of the Lord seems rare? There haven't been very many visions, have there? We now have a whole generation, maybe two, whose ears are simply not tingling with the Truth! Many don't know God! And for many, the Word of the Lord has not yet been revealed to them! And much of that is our fault! We don't want to say the hard things! We don't want to tell anyone what's right and what's wrong! We want to be loved and accepted instead. We tell ourselves that it's all about freedom, and choice, and inclusion, and acceptance! We want people to like us, and so tell ourselves that that's how we'll be able to share the Truth! But how's that working for us? More importantly, how is that working for God, and His Kingdom?

Even as a young pre-teen, after his encounter with God, Samuel had the courage to share some hard truths, with his mentor even, truths that Eli didn't really want to hear. So did Nathanael by the way, with people around him. So, did all of those called by God down through history in fact, who are witnessed to in Scripture! But for some reason, we don't want to make waves!

The Word of the Lord does seem rare these days! There are not many visions taking place! And yet, the Lamp of God has not yet gone out! Don't forget that! Don't ever forget that! The Lamp of God has not yet gone out! And as believers, we are called to reflect that light! And to do it in a way that others will be able to see it, and recognize it! If we do that, and do it boldly, listening before we speak, then maybe visions and miracles won't be so rare! Maybe, multitudes will come to know God! And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we Praise you and Worship you, and long to know you better. We may not always listen, Lord. And we may not always hear. And we may not even recognize your voice, or properly discern your call. But we ask you to enable us to do just that. Open up our hearts so that we might sense you calling out to us. Reach for our hands so that we might discern your Presence. And lead us, Lord, each one of us, your servants, into a personal and powerful relationship with you!

Come to us now, as we come before you with our silent pleas and petitions. Open our hardened hearts, Lord, as we kneel before you in prayer. And heal us, Father, please, and comfort us, and strengthen us for the journeys that we are about to take. Awaken your people to your Holy Spirit, Lord, which already resides in our hearts. Expand our minds, so that we might glimpse your Majesty, and better understand your will and your ways. Cause us to truly seek to obey. Help us to discern, Lord, all the things that you have ordained for our lives, and then to faithfully be about them in your Name. Thank you for calling out to us. Thank you for inviting all of us into a personal relationship with you. And thank you for using us to reach out to others in your Name.

This morning Lord, as your people, we have come to Worship you. And as your people, Lord, we have come to lift up our loved ones before you, those who need you powerfully in their lives right now. Please be with..... Please grant your comfort and your strength. Please heal their bodies. and open their hearts. And please, come to each and all, right where they currently are, right where we currently are, speaking a Word! We have faith in you Lord, and we know that you will be present. So, we make these requests in Jesus' Name, as we pray together now the prayer that He taught us saying, Our Father...