

***“Something New and Fresh”***  
***1 Samuel 3:1-10; Luke 2:22-24***  
***Sermon, 3/24/2019***

Growing up in a heavily Roman Catholic neighborhood has influenced me more than I might have thought. Being a part of one of the only Protestant families on our street, at least one of the only ones to attend church services, rain or shine, each week, made my friends wonder about me and what I believed. One of the clearest memories is of my best friend, Charlie, who once told me that he was worried about me because I was going to Hell when I died. This fear was completely due to what he had been taught. As a non-Catholic, I was doomed. Such a teaching made no sense to me. Why would a God, whose main attribute is love, be so judgmental about someone simply because that person attended the wrong church? That was my simple response. In so many situations since, I have asked the same question. “Why would a God, whose main attribute is love, be so judgmental?” That question, by the way, informs my response in many a situation where some one person or group assumes God accepts some of creation and not others. Why would a loving God behave in such a way? (But that is a sermon for another day). The memory led me to another memory of another religious teaching or custom that I never understood or accepted. It serves as a segue to our reading from I Samuel this morning.

Jack was preparing to enter the priesthood, when he and I became good friends. I had met him through Judie, who about a year later would become my wife. She had met Jack at a Retreat and rightly assumed we could become good friends. One night Jack and I were at a local Chinese Restaurant having dinner and talking theology and our respective paths into ministry. A young woman walked into the restaurant (remember we were both in our mid-twenties and unmarried, and in a different cultural era, one in which Jack’s response would not have been deemed inappropriate). Quietly, he began to talk to me about how beautiful she was and other of her perceived attributes. He asked me what I thought about her. Never one to hold back my thoughts, especially when asked, I said something he did not expect. It was to the effect that I was not looking at her, (although I might have taken a peek) and that I was looking at someone else, someone who would never get through seminary, let alone be ordained as a Roman Catholic priest. Jack protested, mildly, telling me that as the oldest son of Irish parents, it was expected that he would enter seminary. It was not uncommon in that era, especially among European immigrant families to harbor this hope for their oldest sons. “Why would a loving God expect that?” That was my question, essentially the same question I asked about who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. Why would a loving God have wanted him to miss the joy of marrying and having three daughters? Which, in fact,

he went on to do. My observation in the restaurant was correct. The priesthood was not his calling. He needed to be sure whose voice he heard.

In today's Scriptures we hear about the call of Samuel, who is destined to become a priest.<sup>9</sup> The background is rooted in his culture. His mother Hannah has been unable to conceive a child, when we first meet her. She desperately wants a child, and culturally is expected to have one. She prays to God for this to happen. She meets Eli, the priest, who assures her that her prayer will be answered. Overjoyed and in gratitude she promises that when her prayers are answered, she will dedicate her child to the Lord. She delivers a son, Samuel, and after weaning him, places him in the care of Eli to be raised in the holy place at Shiloh. It is here that our passage begins.

***Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim was in bed...and Samuel was lying down in the Temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel' and he said 'Here I am' and ran to Eli, and said 'Here I am, for you called me.'***

This call and response occurs two more times before Eli recognizes what Samuel has misunderstood. Eli had not been calling Samuel, God had been. With this new awareness, Eli directs Samuel, ***Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'*** So Samuel went and lay down in his place...the Lord came and stood there calling as before, ***'Samuel! Samuel!'*** And Samuel said, ***'Speak, for your servant is listening.'***

***'Speak, for your servant is listening.'***

Here we are this morning halfway through the season of Lent, just three weeks from Easter Sunday, and I am wondering what led me to preach on this passage. It is not prescribed by the lectionary, nor is it a natural fit for this season of the Church year. It is not a passage I ever remember using in Lent before. And then I remember what led me here. It was a Lenten reflection by Walter Brueggeman, entitled, ***Like a Thief in the Night (A Way Other Than Our Own)*** It reflects on how God, the mysterious presence, often appears in the nighttime, when our guard is down, or in dark periods of our lives, when a Divine Word seems remote or non-existent. He quotes the call to Samuel, which was at first thought to come from a human source, Eli. Only after a while was the voice recognized as a call from God. Brueggeman reflects on the night, the dark, as moments when God is near. Underlining this reality he ends his reflection with a prayer.

*Divine thief in the night, you come to us in the darkness  
to unsettle our expectations and certainties.*

*Open our hearts to bewilderment, that we may be open to your wisdom. Amen.*

*‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’*

In a time that often feels dark, a time of national angst, a time of likely schism in our own denomination, a time when so much we took for granted is no longer the standard for behavior, is it not a needed corrective for us?

*Speak, for your servant is listening.*

Last Saturday, in the aftermath of a specially called Annual Conference, spurred by the division within our denomination, a Conference faithfully and capably led by our Bishop, Tom Bickerton, I wrote a note to him thanking him for so honestly sharing his sadness about the state of the United Methodist Denomination and his anxiety about leading our Annual Conference at such a difficult time. I felt his pain and sadness and wanted him to know he was not alone. His response came almost immediately, thanks to cyber space. He thanked me for my words of support. But he ended his response on a positive - and I believe true - note. He said he still believed God had something new and fresh in mind and that time would tell what that would be.

*Speak, for your servant is listening.*

That is a word and response I needed to remember. It is one we all need to remember no matter the situation - be it the nighttime of relationships, or national angst, or the more difficult times of child rearing, or the time of aging, or church issues, whatever. We do not have all the answers. But the One, who always has something new and fresh in mind, does.

*Speak, for your servant is listening.*

As we listen, let us be hopeful for Easter. God’s gift of life always comes. In the words of the psalmist: *Weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning.* (Psalm 30). Something new and fresh is coming.

What it will be | who knows?

That it will be | is our certainty.

Something new and fresh is coming. Work for it. Wait for it. Joy, does in fact, come in the morning. Amen.