

Sermon (1/14/18, 1 Samuel 3: 1-21):

It's the one thing I dreaded most-being on call. Everywhere I went and everything I did had to be done in the company of a beeper. I never knew when it would go off, but I knew it would, sometimes numerous times.

At the time, I was one of a few computer whisperers at a hospital not far south of here. The computers we used then were probably as powerful as the ones we now have in our cell phones or our laptops. They were very large, cumbersome, and very needy. Even then, though, the hospital depended on them, which was the reason we had to take turns being on call during off hours.

Every four weeks or so, that beeper would land on my desk. I hated that thing. Whenever it went off, my heart leapt in panic. Would I be able to fix the problem? Would I be able to avert the crisis? I was not as good at this stuff as my colleagues were and I hated calling them for help when I was supposed to be the problem solver or, at least, the problem patcher.

Sometimes it would beep at night, waking me from my sleep. Sometimes it would go off during a movie in a theater (inevitably at a climactic point!). Sometimes it would interrupt a meal, or I'd have to hurriedly leave worship on a Sunday morning, flinging off my choir robe on my way out. Sometimes it went off while I was driving which meant I would have to hunt down a phone somewhere to call the hospital. (There were no cell phones at the time-yes, I'm that old.)

I remember it once going off while I was driving in a snow storm. Well, I wasn't so much driving as I was just sitting in my car, stuck in a load of traffic. It beeped once, then a second time, then a third time! My heart raced. It had to be serious. Where was I going to find a phone? I caught sight of a Mormon church with a few cars in the parking lot. Desperate times call for desperate measures, I thought. I pulled into their parking lot and begged them to let me use their phone – hospital business. They were nice enough. They led me past a group of people to a phone in a nearby office. They then asked me to stay and chat awhile. "I couldn't," I said, "Hospital emergency!" I headed back to my car and resumed my slow quest to the hospital.

Oh, the stories I could tell you about my on-call adventures. Did I tell you how much I hated it? It took me years to get over it. Every time I heard the sound of a beeper, my heart would race, I would break out into a sweat, and my attention would immediately be drawn away from whatever I was doing. I had become like Pavlov's dogs who were conditioned to salivate when a bell rang only, in this case, it was a beeper and the reaction was panic.

Unlike the high probability of that beeper going off, today's story happens at a time when we're told that the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread. (Oh, if only that had been true of that beeper!)

Rare was the moment when God sounded the alarm, which I guess is the reason why Samuel and even his experienced mentor, Eli, were so slow to recognize it was God's voice that kept waking Samuel up.

'Samuel! Samuel!' resounded the voice of God in the Temple where Samuel had made his bed.

It had to be more than a little creepy. I know I get a little creeped out when I'm here alone in the church. You just wouldn't believe the strange sounds this old building makes when it's dark and you're all alone. Sometimes I even wonder if it might be old Rev. Chilton, reminding me that he's keeping a close eye on me.

Samuel was just a young boy at the time, all alone in that cavernous space where God was believed to reside.

'Samuel! Samuel!' the voice called. Samuel's little feet slapped against the bare floor as he raced to his Mentor's side, figuring it was Eli who was calling. "Here I am!" he announced, as he jiggled old Eli awake. 'Go back to sleep...' Eli said, waving Samuel away figuring the boy was suffering from a bad dream.

Two more times God called Samuel and two more times Samuel leapt from his bed, returning to Eli's side. It was only after the third trip to Eli's side, that Eli realized it was something more than a bad dream.

The irony of Eli not expecting God to speak in the Temple is not lost on us. The word of the Lord was, indeed, rare in those days. So rare that even experienced old Eli had forgotten what God's voice sounded like.

Heeding his Mentor's instructions, when God called Samuel a fourth time, Samuel was ready. As instructed, he sat up in bed and said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.' Samuel was eager and open to God's word. This was one incredibly brave little boy!

The message that God gave him was a challenging one. 'Behold,' God said, 'I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.'

When, do you think, was the last time anyone in Israel had felt a God induced tingle? When was the last time you felt a tingle? When was the last time something that was said or sung or read at worship got under your skin so much that you just couldn't stop thinking about it? When was the last time you felt something ignite in you that felt holy, God triggered?

Unfortunately, especially as we get older, it does seem to happen less and less, doesn't it? The excitement we felt when we were younger gives way to a dulling of our senses. Life's challenges, hardships, and busyness tends to get the best of us, making us think that our 'tingle' days are all but behind us. The thrill of newness – new experiences, new ideas, new sights, new potential – give way to mundane repetition. We resign ourselves to the belief that there's nothing new under the sun. The names might change but the political, self-preserving gridlock that defines our governmental structures retains its immovability. The battlefields might change but the same old warring tensions that keep us on edge never seem to lose their grip. The miraculous cures of the day and ingenious inventions of the moment instill us with a sense of cautious optimism, but something always happens to dampen our spirits. These are the things that take their toll as the years pass.

There was a time when, after reading this passage, I quickly and easily identified with Samuel in this story. Young, energetic, quick and eager to respond, filled with untarnished hope and unhindered excitement. 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening!' Let me lose. Lead me where you will.

Today I worry I have become more like Eli. Waving away enthusiastic Samuels. Filled with assumptions that 'the word of the Lord

is rare these days'. Unable to perceive the new thing God is anxious to do because of the mark left on me by too many years of disappointments and failed dreams.

I sometimes worry if I've become an Eli, quickly dismissing the young boy tugging on my blanket, trying to awaken something in me even as I roll over, anxious to catch a few more winks before my alarm drags me from bed.

How many of us have become Elis? We trade in worship for a little extra sleep on Sunday mornings. We neglect wrestling with God's Word, figuring there is nothing new to be found in its old stories. We lose our enthusiasm for learning and growing our faith because we're convinced that, in the end, its ability to really change anything is weak if not non-existent. We leave our worship life, our prayer life, our church life behind because we're convinced 'that the word of the Lord is rare these days' so what's the use.

The contrast between Eli and Samuel is stark. Samuel is the one ready to snap into action. Eli is the one who has all but resigned himself to the sleepy mundane.

What's interesting, though, is that even with this stark contrast, Eli and Samuel very much need each other. Samuel is the young, wet behind the ears, eager to give it a try one. Eli is the seasoned albeit tired Priest who is resigned to the fact that God is permanently silent. Even though he was slow on the uptake, like I seem to have often become, without Eli, Samuel would have kept plunking his feet on the ground and racing into Eli's room thinking it was his Mentor calling him. Without Samuel, Eli would have never heard the difficult but critical message God had to give in an age when Eli thought God had become painfully absent.

God is persistent in this passage, just like that beeper I once carried. If I didn't respond quickly, it would beep again and again and again until I did. It never let me off the hook.

God's waking intrusion continues until God's message is heard. Neither Eli or Samuel are going to miss out on what God has ordained. Like it or not, God is going to wake them both up. Like it or not, when the time is right, God will wake us up too.

The news God gives is both hard and renewing. Eli's dynasty as a priest is about to come to an end. His sons have made a mess of things as they took their family inherited priestly places in the Temple for granted. They were greedy with the sacrifices people brought, taking far more than they were entitled to. They took advantage of the desperate, particularly women, who came to the Temple for help. They assumed they could get away with it because it was their right as part of the Eli dynasty they had inherited. God had other ideas, though. The long reign of Eli's tired era was over.

God will not allow failed systems that abuse and harm to continue. No matter how entrenched and immovable a system might seem, it will be replaced when it loses sight of its calling to love as God has loved us. Not only will God be heard when God speaks but so too will God's decisive intrusions be enacted. We remember this truth this weekend as we celebrate the birthdate of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the dismantling of legalized segregation.

Samuel is reluctant to share the message God has given him with Eli. He loved his Mentor and this message was sure to sting. Eli insists, though, and Eli's response is one of gracious and obedient nobility. He says, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

We see in both Samuel and Eli a startling and incredible response of obedience.

Samuel who is eager to live into God's calling even though it is filled with hard, prophetic words that challenge.

Eli who exhibits an extraordinary openness to the new that God has set into motion even though the change it demands is painful.

The partnership of Eli and Samuel, reveals the trusted steadfastness of hope that comes when God's voice breaks through the din of immovability, proclaiming that something new and wonderful is about to happen.

A couple of weeks ago, as I worked on my note for our latest newsletter, I thought a lot about the many good things that happened in our church as 2017 came to an end. The 96 bags we collected for the Doors of Hope food pantry, the thousands of dollars we gave away to

support important missions both locally and abroad, the absolute miracle of ending 2017 with a small surplus in our General Fund, the increased worship attendance we've been experiencing lately and the general good feeling I sense on Sunday mornings, the wonderful and exciting discussions going on in our study groups, the significant efforts being made by our new Music Director and new Christian Ed. Director, the incredible graciousness and stick-to-it-ness of those who serve on Consistory, on committees, and in a variety of other capacities in our church, and, of course, the many, many lives I see being touched and changed every day by this church's ministry.

As I thought about all this, I must be honest, I felt a little tingly. I'm not exactly sure what God is up to, but I get the feeling that God is up to something. I also know that whatever it is it won't always be easy. Sometimes the Samuels among us will need to tell us hard things and sometimes the Elis among us will need to wake up from their slumber to pay attention to this Holy Voice we haven't heard in a while. Most of all, we need to remember that just as Eli and Samuel needed each other we too need each other. And, maybe, just maybe, if we keep those three things in mind, we too will begin to feel a little tingly and, let me tell you, that's a whole lot better than what I felt when that darn beeper went off!

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

## Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

***People: And also with you.***

Leader: Let us pray...

‘Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening!’

Awaken us, even when the words you speak are hard and demanding.

We have grown weary of the routine, the mundane that seems to entrap us. Break open the stillness of the night, and call to us, lead us, whisper in our ears stirrings of the new you have already set into motion.

For some of us, O God, the tingle of newness has long lost its ability to impress us. We have grown cynical and weary. We have grown accustomed to accepting what is, rather than embracing the new that your Spirit not only makes possible but demands. We have grown hesitant and fearful of the change your goodness asks of us. We have grown resistant to your call, because we are afraid of what it will require of us.

Speak, Lord, for the systems that have forgotten how to love; the systems that have forgotten how to be gracious and forgiving; the systems that take advantage of others and do more harm than good have become legion.

Speak, Lord, enact your will on your creation as we put our trust in its goodness. Make us receptive to your change and make us persistent but patient as we claim our part in it.

We are mindful, this day, of your dear ones, O God. Your dear ones who suffer and are in pain. Your dear ones who are feeling overwhelmed by bad news and are unsure of where to turn for help. Your dear ones who are tired and weary and broken. Your dear ones who grieve and are filled with tears too numerous to hold back. Your dear ones who have grown frail and whose days are filled with worry. This morning we especially hold before you these prayers we now name in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

*All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*