

Like A Thief In The Night

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This place we dedicate today is like all such places we have dedicated... special, holy, awesome...a place which is filled with danger and possibility, where we expect focus, surprise, and healing. The Old Testament reading assigned for this Sunday, happily enough (I did not pick it) is the wondrous account of the boy Samuel on assignment in the temple, where the old priest Eli presided. Imagine now that this place is that place, and we are all the innocent boy Samuel. Watch what happens in that place, as a clue to what the potential freightedness of this place is.

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I.

Here in the temple with the old priest, the boy is assigned a period of service for the sake of *nurture*, education, induction and socialization into the faith of his people. He thought it was to help out, but the adults knew it was to nurture him into trustful obedience. This community knows that induction into the faith and growth into mature faith are not automatic and do not happen by osmosis. Induction comes by hanging around, living under discipline, being exposed, engaged in conversation and chores, overhearing, and so being shaped in a special and alternative life.

That boy hung around. He spent a lot of time with Eli, the great traditioner. He overheard and watched the comings and goings of the faithful. As he did so, he slowly became an intentional Israelite. He learned who Yahweh was, and what God does, and how we speak of God. He gradually came to the awareness that we believe and think and trust and act differently, not like the Canaanites, not like the Philistines, but like the offspring of Moses, and the heirs of Abraham and Sarah. These offspring and heirs have a peculiar angle on lived reality.

As this story has it, however, the experience of the young boy turned out to be a great deal more than nurture. In the midst of this slow, steady process of nurture, there came a voice from beyond, unexpected and inexplicable. That voice may come anywhere anytime; but it comes often in this holy place. The voice was abrupt and direct: "Samuel, Samuel." Two times, "Samuel, Samuel." It called the boy by name. It already knew him and addressed him. More than that, the voice seized this little Samuel and claimed him. It called him and gave him *vocation*, purpose, identity, and focus. It called him outside himself to a much larger horizon.

This utterance of the holy voice sent the boy Samuel on the way to adulthood and, in the story of the books of Samuel, sent him on the way to power and purpose. The nurture of the holy place is not simply for reassurance, maintenance, and business as usual. It is for transformation, so that folk in such a place are often jarred and disrupted, and their life is set off in new directions where they did not intend to go. Folk here wind up being called, not to a job or to a profession, but to a vocation, a calling a purpose larger than themselves. This place is filled with this overriding voice, and its speaker is the one who must be obeyed. When we come here and bring our young here, we expect confrontation and immediacy, and often a wrenching change in the purpose of our life. For you see, this place is not like all the other places. It is a different place, charged with other presence and other purpose, and we may expect here to be addressed and called.

II.

There is an odd turn in the tale of the boy Samuel. The action takes place at night. He is lying down. The lamps in the temple are burning. Now admittedly, we do not come to church much at night, and if we do, it is usually for something other than meeting this holy God.

But imagine! Like the boy Samuel, our real meetings are at night, if we take "night" to be a metaphor for "down time." Night is when we cannot see. Night is when we cannot control. Night is when children are frightened, because the shadows seem lively. Night is when things are unclear and beyond explanation. Night is when we are terrorized, and so we have bright lights all around the house to fend off the darkness. Night is when even adults are out of control, and we are visited by our haunted past and our feared future, and we dream and have nightmares.

Listen to the Psalmist, part of the Psalm assigned for this day (Psalm 139:7-12):

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, 'Let only darkness cover me, and the light about me be night' even the darkness is not dark to thee, the night is as bright as the day; for darkness is as light with thee.

The darkness is *God's special time of unsettling*, when we entertain strange, unthought possibilities. So it is in the night when the address of God comes: "Samuel, Samuel." Something odd happens. The old priest Eli misses the point. The boy goes to his mentor Eli and says, "Did you call me?" And the priest says, "You are dreaming. Go back to bed." A second time he says, "No I did not call you." Only with the third time did old Eli figure out what was happening. "Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy." And then on the fourth time around, the boy was finally prepared and answered, "I am ready to listen."

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The night time is bewildering. The boy did not understand, and the old priest was slow to figure it out. It was bewildering to him because something not routine was happening. The anthropologists call this "liminality," an unsettling at the threshold of something new, when life is gathered into a wholly new configuration.

Now I say this because too much the church in our society is thought to be a place of unambiguous answers and sure certitudes, where we come settled and cock-sure, and the Spirit has no chance to change anything. Liberals get it all settled, and conservatives get it all settled. It is, however, more often than not, night time in the church – bewilderment, confusion, liminality, unsettlement. Then the emergence of something new from God that comes like a thief in the night.

The narrative suggests that the holy place must not be understood with too much day time certitude, but more like night time bewilderment, for it is in odd moments that we sort out the voices of address, and God works the newness of nurture and vocation, demand, and promise and healing. So think of this place, as did the boy Samuel, as a place of the night time, when new voices utter our names.

III.

Now the story moves to its heavy climax. The story so far has been simple and idyllic, and we often stop reading at this point. Only late in the narrative does God give the message and command to the boy, who is now taken up in God's terrible purpose. God says, "I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears tingle." "Tingling ears" come in the Bible from telling hard truth which deeply upsets. The truth given to the boy, that he must now tell to the old priest Eli, is that established power is about to fall and be destroyed, because it has betrayed the purposes of God. The word that arises in the night that must be spoken in the day is that God is bringing all present power and authority relations to an end. The word in the night will cause a terrible upheaval and displacement in the day.

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I propose to you, on the basis of that odd turn of the story, that this holy place is finally a place of *truth-telling*, of speaking things to each other that can be said no where else, but which we need to hear. Healing depends upon truth-telling, and the god who comes here is the god of all truth. We all know that we live in a fakey, phoney society. (See David Gergen in the NY Times). We learn to distrust and disbelieve, because we do not trust advertisers or politicians to tell the truth. We build our relationships on small lies, and our social institutions on great deceptions. And finally we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. Our society does not want truth-telling, because it is too difficult and too unsettling. The church is tempted, greatly tempted, to echo society. Nonetheless and for all of

that, folk come here for the hard truth and the good truth that causes tingling in our ears and healing in our bones. In the end, we know that it is truth that makes us genuinely free.

This truth-telling is often "bad news" that then permits good news. Thus, in our gospel lesson concerning Andrew and Nathaniel, it is the good truth-telling that shatters all else. Andrew comes to tell his brother Peter the hard truth: "We have found the Messiah." And Nathaniel breaks out in truth: "You are the Son of God." But the truth about Jesus is not only good news. It is the shattering of all that is old, even as it was for Eli. And that shattering then circles back, as for Samuel, to obedience and nurture and vocation.

We are all that little boy called. And we are all that old man confused. And we are all the disciples that move astonished to newness. This building now becomes, in this dedication, a very odd place. It is no ordinary place just for having meetings.

It is a place of *presence*, where god shows up to disrupt and to transform.

It is a place of *nurture and vocation*, where we and our young are refocused.

It is a place of *night time bewilderment* through which comes transformation.

It is a place of *truth-telling* which shatters and which invites new visions of saying.

This is a visited place. Care must be taken that it not be flattened or trivialized, or made a servant to our best pet projects. It is a place haunted by God's Otherness, an Otherness which is our own deepest yearning and the great hope for our world.