

January 18, 2015
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1 Samuel 3:1-20

Show Up

Sometimes at my house, someone will call from another room, saying someone's name, and then some sentences after. From another room it can be hard to understand, sounds like: [*Muffled sentence.*] So you go wandering around in confusion and some annoyance, saying, "What? Whose calling? Are you calling me? Perhaps you have also had this happen to you. In my experience, children, in particular, like to begin conversations in this way.

This pattern of communication is a pet peeve of my husband, Tim. When it happens, he waits, makes eye contact with the caller, then advises, quite reasonably, "Be in the same room as the person with whom you are speaking." Now I, too, find it irritating when our children do this, but I can't fault them, entirely, for I recently found myself in our house, calling out to someone several rooms away: "Tim, Tim, have you..." Tim couldn't understand what I was saying. He came and made eye contact with me ... his eyes said it all: "Be in the same room as the person with whom you are speaking."

I think that's what Eli says too, in the first reading, in which Samuel is wandering around, wondering who is speaking to him and what they are saying. Of course in this scenario, it isn't the child, or the mother, who is calling, it's God. But I won't presume to give God a withering look. When it comes to conversations with God, the onus is on listener. But I think the advice still holds: "Be in the same room as the person with whom you are speaking." I think that's what Eli is saying, when he advises Samuel to quit wandering around, to lie down and say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." I think Eli is saying to Samuel, "Be in the same room as the one with whom you are speaking." Or, to put it more bluntly, Eli is saying: "God's calling. Show up."

To give some background on the story Eli, an older priest, has been given a young charge, Samuel, who is preparing for ministry under Eli's tutelage. It's important to note both their immediate context, they are in the house of the Lord, and the broader context, how this story fits into the Old Testament timeline as a whole. This is after the Exodus, but before King David. This is after arrival and settlement in the Promised Land, but before the institution of the monarchy. This is after an experience of miraculous deliverance, of hard won liberation, but before development and unification of a holy nation. This is a time of uncertainty, and lack of direction. Maybe at times, it feels like abandonment, divine abandonment—or, at least scarcity. As the reading says, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." That relationship with God that had been announced in a blazing theophany, when God spoke to Moses from a burning bush, when God said, I AM—that's rare...

These are hard times in the life of a people. Those heroic leaders and historic accomplishments can be a source of pride and identity, but they can also feel like a reprimand. Amazing events brought us to this point. Now we feel stuck. The future is hard to predict, and the facts of the present are not encouraging. Seeing beyond them will require a special kind of sight, a special kind of vision.

Sadly, today's reading says, "At that time, Eli's ... eyesight had begun to grow dim, so that he could not see." Perhaps you have gotten to the age in which your eyes no longer focus like they used to; you find yourself shifting books. One last time I'll embarrass Tim, who recently had that experience, to his chagrin. Of course, with Eli, we're talking about a different kind of vision. Just prior to today's reading we hear about Eli's sons, who were supposed to

follow their father as priests, but have proved to be a bitter disappointment, have corrupted their calling. I am sure that tore at Eli's heart, as did the vision that Samuel eventually shares, which confirms that Eli's sons are unfit, and that Eli is partly to blame.

And yet, Eli knows, this is bigger than that. Visions may be rare, but "the lamp of God had not yet gone out." Eli's eyes may be dim, but he can still see that God's purposes will not be thwarted, not by Eli's own sons, not by Eli himself. There is a gracious and tender acknowledgement of this by Eli—of the way that God will work for good, of the way that God creates new families. There is a gracious and tender acknowledgement of this in the way that Eli speaks to Samuel, in his patience with him, in his instruction to him about how to reply to God, and, most especially, in how he refers to him at the end of the reading. Eli speaks to a frightened Samuel, who is afraid to say that will be hard for Eli to hear. I think Eli knows what Samuel is about to say. Still Eli encourages him, saying, "Samuel, my son."

Eli can only do this, because though his eyes are dim, his ears are good. Actually, it's not that Eli's ears are good, it's that he knows how to listen. Eli knows that it is God who is calling Samuel, and Eli knows that to hear what God is saying, you have to be in the same room. Remember where Samuel was, when he first heard the voice? Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Hint, Hint, Wink Wink. That might be a good place to be to hear God. "Go back there and lie down," Eli says, "God's calling. Show up."

You've probably heard that saying, that 80% of success is showing up. It means that along with flashing insight, maybe even more than flashing insight, you have to be there. Don't underestimate the significance of presence, shared company—most especially shared company with God! And, in fact, Samuel will become a successful prophet, will be known as trustworthy, throughout the land, because he shows up for God.

There are plenty of reasons not to show up. As the entire saying goes, "Showing up is 80 percent of life. Sometimes it's easier to hide in bed." It's not just easier, and cozier, it's less scary. That the alternative is "hiding" betrays the risk involved. Showing up is about much more than getting out of bed, it's about braving the gaze of others. Showing up means not just being there, but offering what you think, having the courage to share who you are, with all the vulnerability that entails. Showing up is about being in the same room and being who you are in it. It's scary.

But when you do that, when you take that risk, you get a glimpse of God's future. You get to be a part of that. When Samuel shows up, God shows up. Notice how today's story goes from Samuel's "Here I am," to God's: "See I AM..." God says, "See I am about to do something... ear tingling."

Some decades ago, a young prophet named Martin showed up. Martin Luther King Jr. was only 26 years old when he was called to be in the same room as activists planning a bus boycott. In time, King's prophetic leadership led a movement. Many people know many of his ear tingling words by heart. And yet, it's important to note that it took showing up for King to find his voice, to hear and live his calling. In the words of one of his biographers and admirers: "Martin Luther King Jr. was a B+ preacher until he got caught up in something larger than himself." It took others showing up, too: showing up at lunch counters, and showing up to enroll in school, and showing up to march across bridges.

We are in a different time, and we praise God for that. We note, too, the challenge of this time, as past achievements haunt current, different, but real difficulties, as hindsight reveals even great leaders' flaws. Still, we are invited to be caught up in God's great vision for the world. In this house of God, hear the word of God: the lamp of God has not yet gone out. I can see it, shining in your faces. Can you see it? Can't you feel it, when we are present to one another? When we listen, to the advice of Eli, "God's calling..."