

## **Wake Up: 1 Samuel 3:1-10**

Norwalk Christian Church, January 17, 2015, Epiphany 2, Year B

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It's happens more times than we like. You've had a hectic day, too busy to even think. Finally, you crash on your pillow, ready to get the rest you've so desperately needed all day. You eventually doze off, and then it happens.

It's about 3am. You wake up suddenly, and a rush of thought enters your mind. You are exhausted, but your mind is wide-awake. You think about your day, all you did and didn't do. You think about your regrets, your future. You think about your doubts, your questions, your fears. The longer you lay there, the longer it goes.

Many people have remedies for these midnight intrusions of thought. Some count sheep, but for most of us, we need more than sheep. You've got to get up. Walk around the house. Let the dog out. Turn the TV on. Eat a sandwich. Make to-do lists. Something. Anything. To put your thoughts asleep again, repress whatever it is that is trying to come out of you in the middle of the night, and go back to your peaceful rest.

Beds can be scary places. What is it about the silence of the night that brings up so many shadows? Things you haven't thought about in years, voices you haven't heard in years, now coming back and speaking to you at 3am.

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In our text this morning, when Samuel is first awoken at 3am, he is still a boy, and assumes this nightly voice is the Priest Eli. Now, let me refresh our memory of Samuel.

Remember this is the boy who was born out of promise. His mother, Hannah, had been without a child. Her husband had other wives who all gave him children, but she had not. In a culture like hers, where the woman's worth depended on what she could do for a man, being barren meant being worthless.

So Hannah prayed and prayed to the Lord that God would give her a son. If she had a son, she promised to give the baby back to the Lord. And that's what she did. When she finally became pregnant and gave birth to Samuel, she dedicated him to the Lord, and he was raised in the temple by the old priest Eli.

I like to think of Samuel as the patron saint of preacher kids and children of active church leaders. All you kids who feel like you're practically raised in the church building, while mom and dad sit in meetings, Samuel can relate.

Temples and churches can be fun places to play around. They can also be scary places. They're big, they're dark. They creak and moan. For us adults, they can be scary places, too, but for other reasons.

Being in these holy places can sometimes be like waking up at 3am...all your regrets, fears and doubts are suddenly right in front of you, no denying it, no repressing it. Memories of your youth. Memories of your parents, when they used to take you to church. Churches can be scary places. You never know what's hiding inside, and what voices may speak to you.

But sometimes, it's not the voices that are scary. Sometimes it's the silence that is scary. The voices of your youth are not there any more. You ask questions, but all you get is silence.

We are told that Samuel's time was a time of Divine silence. "The word of the Lord was rare in those days," the text says. "Visions were not widespread." This seems strange for Old Testament times. Scripture tells us of the stories of the Saints who encountered God first hand. We would think that this is the way things always were. But in between the Moseses and the Samuels, there was often silence. A profound, fearful silence.

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When the silence is finally broken, it is broken to a young boy, a boy, we are told does not even know the Lord. In spite of his growing up in the Temple, the house of the Lord, he doesn't know the Lord. I guess it goes to show us that being in the house of the Lord all your life does not necessarily mean that you know the Lord.

So when Samuel hears voices at 3am, he thinks it's Eli. "Here I am", he says. He runs into Eli's room, expecting the old priest to be in need of help. Yet when he gets there, Eli is asleep. Maybe Samuel did just hear something, the wind, the creaks of the temple. He goes back to sleep, but he hears the voice again. He runs into see Eli, but it wasn't Eli. He goes to bed again and hears the voice a third time. "Here I am", he says again, and rushes to Eli. This time Eli's figuring it out.

"Go back to bed," Eli says. "But the next time you hear the voice, answer, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'"

Samuel obeys, the voice calls again, and Samuel replies, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening." And God speaks.

It takes courage to answer the voices that speaks to us at the night. We run and hide from our voices. We try to drown them out. Samuel finally listens, and God speaks.

We didn't read the rest of the story this morning, but it's not good. When God does speak, Samuel is told of the evil that Eli's sons are doing, exploiting their priestly power as they sexually abuse the people they are sworn to spiritually care for, while living lavishly off the temple collection plates.

The Priest Eli knows what his sons are doing, yet he ignores it. We don't know if God tried to speak to Eli in the middle of the night, but if God did, Eli couldn't bring himself

to say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” He was too afraid of what would follow.

So, God speaks to Samuel, instead. Eli’s sons’ days are numbered, Samuel is told, and their abusive ministry will soon be put to an end. It’s not the sort of message a boy looks forward to receiving. I’m sure Samuel wished he would have just ignored the voices.

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I guess we could say that we, like Samuel, live in a day in which “the word of the LORD is rare” and “visions are not widespread.” Usually, when someone says God speaks to them, I’m skeptical. Those who occasionally claim God has spoken to them, usually do so to tell us how to vote or what group of people God is displeased with this time. If that’s God speaking, it sure doesn’t sound like God to me.

I’ll be honest, I don’t know if God is speaking to me or to anyone these days. It’s easy to just say God’s not, and go about life. Yet, the 3am wake-up calls still come. The voices still speak. Often, it’s the voice of a friend or mentor. Sometimes it’s through something I’ve read, or a memory that suddenly fills my mind.

Is God silent in our day, or are we just not listening?

These days, we fill our lives with so much activity, always with a cell phone to play with or a TV show to watch, it’s hard to have a moment alone with our thoughts. If God is trying to speak, we couldn’t hear it with all the noise. I wonder what would happen if we turned everything off, and in the silence, simply said, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”?

We don’t say that enough. Are we afraid that we will answer and get a response, or that we will answer and hear nothing?

Maybe the voice will ask us to change, to finally confront the things that we are trying to avoid. Maybe the voice will ask us act on our dreams, instead of putting them off. Maybe the voice will call us to lay down our fears and prejudices, to trust more and follow more, instead of hiding and avoiding.

I don’t know if Martin Luther King heard voices as a child, but he certainly answered God’s call on his life. What would the world have been like, if he had never said, “Here I am. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”? The message he heard was not an easy one, but it was one that had to be preached.

So what is waking you up at night? Do you think it could be God? The next time you think it might be, heed the advice of the old priest Eli, and answer, “Here I am. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

You probably won't hear a voice, at least not an audible one like the text says Samuel heard. But you may hear something. When you stop avoiding your life, and really start listening to your thoughts, your fears, your doubts, your questions...what will you hear? What will God be speaking into your life? What will God call you to do?

But be careful. Once you hear God's call in the night, the journey begins, and there's no going back.

So, here we are, Lord. Speak! We are listening.