

“RECOGNIZING GOD’S PRESENCE”

1 SAMUEL 3:1-10

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This passage was part of a longer passage I preached on only two months ago. The beauty of scripture is that you can read it again and again, hearing different aspects each time. So I welcome this opportunity to address it again, because I did, indeed, hear something else in this week’s reading. Let us pray:

O God, help us to listen for you and to be open to hearing new understandings. And may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer.

Imagine you are Samuel. You have been wakened in the night as you sleep near the holy of holies where the sacred Ark of the Covenant is kept. You have stumbled sleepily to old Eli, the temple priest, thinking he has called you and needs something. But he has sent you back to bed, not once, but twice now. The first time you easily went back to sleep but this time, you feel something hard to define, something that is an odd mixture of curiosity and uneasiness.

Up to now you have just been the child assisting the priest, the task to which your parents dedicated you when you were very small. But there is some change unfolding that you are sensing this night, something unidentifiable that beckons you. You strain to hear that voice calling again, the voice that you earlier thought was only a dream. You begin to ponder if this may be what you have heard spoken of when people have reminisced about the days when God’s voice was heard and recognized. Some folks seem to recall that period of time with longing. Others convey something more like resignation, a hopelessness that God’s presence will ever again be as evident as it once was.

Imagine now you are Eli. Your sleep has been disrupted by the small boy Samuel on whom you have come to rely. Your own sons, Hophni and Phineas, have been such a disappointment. Israel is in crisis because your sons are so corrupt. The people’s worship has been negatively impacted by them. The Israelite’s meat offerings are being confiscated by your sons so that they can have the best for themselves. The people are deprived of offering their best to God, a critical aspect of their worship.

You used to agonize about this. The older you have gotten, the more indifferent you have become. But this night the old feelings of regret and remorse have surfaced. And something is nagging at you, gnawing at you.....what is it? The boy Samuel has been such a great help. You think of how you

have grown fond of him, how much you have come to depend on him. You ponder what might be waking him....rather unusual behavior for Samuel.

And then some glimmer of insight begins to filter into your awareness.....could it be? Could it be that into this time of barrenness of spirit -this dearth of spiritual light - that God is breaking through?

This was an in-between time for Samuel and for Eli, the time between the second call to Samuel and the third, when Eli confirmed this was indeed God calling to Samuel, a time when they each began to sense at least the hint of God's presence.

We find ourselves in something of an in-between time as well. Thinking of in-between times sparked my thinking about "thin places," a Celtic term with which you may or may not be familiar. There is a Celtic saying that heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in the thin places that distance is even smaller. A thin place is where the veil that separates heaven and earth is lifted and one is able to receive a glimpse of the glory of God.

In the words of one poet:

"Thin places," the Celts call this space,
Both seen and unseen,
Where the door between this world
And the next is cracked open for a moment
And the light is not all on the other side.
God shaped space. Holy (----sharlade sledge)

While the Celts were a culture of people who arrived in Ireland after 500 BCE and are associated with the concept of thin places, this concept preceded them. It was previously associated with pagan beliefs that there was another world and the thin places were where inhabitants from the other world would go back and forth. For this reason some Christians have rejected Celtic spirituality.

However, one author I discovered traced in the bible what could be considered thin places to include this very place where Samuel slept, there by the holy of holies, which was symbolic to the Israelites of God's presence.

So here we are in what would call an in-between space or what might even be considered a thin place, a place where the veil might part and we might encounter a vision of clarity from God. Yet one author pointed out that such places can also have an element of confusion, a sense of being disoriented.

I think of the story we have of Elijah the prophet when he was on the run from an angry queen, Jezebel, because he had killed the prophets of Baal, the deity she worshipped. The scripture tells us a messenger came to Elijah in the night. (Does this sound familiar?) The messenger tells him to get up and eat something because he tells Elijah "you have a difficult road ahead of you."

So Elijah ate and spent forty days and nights (this also sounds familiar, no?) Traveling to Horeb, God's mountain, otherwise known as Mount Sinai, the place where Israel made a covenant with God. Depending on how one calculates it, this was a challenging "hike" from Beer-Sheba to Mount Horeb of about 250 miles. He spent the night in a cave and was awakened by the voice of the Lord.

From the translation of the common English bible: there the lord said, "Go out and stand at the mountain before the Lord. The Lord is passing by." A very strong wind tore through the mountains and broke apart the stones before the Lord. But the Lord wasn't in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake. But the Lord wasn't in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a fire. But the Lord wasn't in the fire. After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his coat and went out and stood at the entrance to the cave (for the passing by of the Lord).

All the ways Elijah might have expected God to reveal Himself, were not the ways that Elijah ultimately experienced the presence of God.

Because I don't have enough to do—wink, wink-- (☺) I signed up for a spirituality and practice course on "Holy Silence, the Quaker way." In the first online post I got in the course, the author wrote: "The psalmist urges us to 'be still, and know that I am God.' friends (that is, Quakers) believe that this inward, mystical union is more likely to happen if we approach silence expectantly. Even though the old Quaker joke calls us to 'don't just do something, sit there.' Holy Silence is more than just sitting there. Silence is something we do, not something done to us. It is a participatory act. It engages our heart, mind soul, and body in listening for the voice of the beloved. Quaker silence is not passive.....Quaker silence allows us to actively pursue a new experience of God."

So, beloved Pilgrims, I do not know what you may have heard in this message. We are blessed with a diversity of experience and understanding here. My understanding is that this in between time in which we find ourselves is not a passive time. This is a time in which each individual in this congregation bears some responsibility for supporting the search process. Pray for the search committee, as they seek the person who is being called to lead us. Pray for that person yet unknown to us who is listening for God's call that she or he may respond. Pray for continued blessing on the work we are doing. Contribute in the ways you can to that work. Put some heart and mind into how you imagine our future path taking shape. Take into that visioning an openness to God's surprises, new directions, paths previously not considered. Recall that for Elijah God was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, all the expected places.

Let us recognize God's presence in this time, this place. Consider Pilgrim as a kind of holy ground. If you are so inclined, take off your shoes this very moment as Moses did when God called him from the burning bush and said "Don't come any closer! Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground."

I invite you to say with me: "We are standing on holy ground."

Quaker silence, my online teacher wrote, is pregnant with holy expectation. With all our being full of holy expectation, and recognizing God's presence upon this holy ground, may we open our ears and readily, eagerly, joyfully respond: speak, God, for we are listening.

And all God's people said "amen!"-
