

Meditation 1: "Identifying the One Who Calls" January 17, 2021

Scripture Lesson 1: I Samuel 3:1-20

3Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. ²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. ⁴Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."
¹¹Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. ¹²On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. ¹⁴Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." ¹⁵Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." ¹⁷Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." ¹⁸So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."
¹⁹As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

Why is it that, in my past, the people who told me to trust them most often and most emphatically, often wound up being the persons I trusted least? I have an answer to that question - my experience and the experience of others proved them wrong. They wanted to be trusted so badly, but had not examined what they trusted enough. It was as if they were so horrified at the prospect of being wrong that they more adamantly insisted they were right - but they weren't. They were wrong -- Not only wrong, but sometimes destructively wrong. It was as if the more they shouted their trustworthiness to me, the less they were to be trusted. As if spoken trust was of much less value than demonstrated trust.....

So, how is it that we can recognize that a voice is trustworthy?

I was recently listening to a very interesting interview on the radio; the person being interviewed was Timothy Snyder, the Levin Professor of History at Yale University, whose [books](#) include studies of Hitler, Josef Stalin, the Holocaust and tyranny. He was talking about something that happens from time to time in

history, a phenomenon called "The Big Lie." The Big Lie is an untruth that is lifted up, emphasized, repeated, and recycled in ways that push an individual or group agenda; it is shouting a lie so loudly and so often that people - not all people, but some people - begin to believe it is true. It doesn't matter to these people that it works against reason or evidence, for the people who believe in the lie want it to be true. The professor then said something that really caught my attention - he told the interviewer that "a big lie is a lie which is big enough to tear the fabric of reality."

I believe that today, we as a country have a front-row seat to just such a tearing of the fabric of our reality. There are many falsehoods being shouted repeatedly throughout a populace connected more closely than ever before; word, any word, especially a false word, gets around instantly. And these falsehoods are not only being received and believed in by a significant portion of our population - they are leading to actions that are transparently destructive. "Stop the Steal" and vaccination fears and conspiracy theories and refusing to trust science - these are the sources of fabrications that play upon the fragility of the human species, a species easily manipulated through their anxieties and fears, easily drawn in by playing upon their greed and prejudices. We are living in a time when a growing question is rising in the minds of all persons of integrity, namely - HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT IS TRUE?

We can take great counsel from the scripture lesson before us, for both Eli and Samuel are trying to figure things out in a time when truth -- God's truth, that is - seemed to be a rare commodity. It was as if God had gone silent, after speaking to the people of Israel directly, through the prophets of old and the patriarchs and leaders of their ancestors. But was it that God was speaking rarely in those days - or that the hearing of the people had changed? Had they grown to believe in the big lies of their day, their fears driving them to the worship of lesser deities of power and conflict, of more convenient gods that appease the rulers of their day more than acknowledge a sovereign God over all? Are we, perhaps, on the edge of a time when we are in danger of worshipping the lesser gods of partisanship, of power and greed, or of science denial?

We are always in danger of such things, as history reveals, but we are also always capable of returning to the truths that establish reality. For those truths never go away. They may be out-shouted by falsehoods, but the shouting eventually gives way; we might be distracted by alarmist theories, but those theories do not stand the test of time. There can be so many voices saying

contradicting things about what is real and what is true - but time has a habit of revealing which voices remain steadily consistent with reality. And it is those voices which align with God's creation that stand all tests of time.

It was hard for both Samuel and Eli to recognize that it was the voice of truth that was speaking to them - but God kept speaking.

It must have been hard for Eli, the priest of the temple, to finally realize he couldn't hear what God was saying - but God kept speaking.

It must have been equally hard for Samuel, once he actually heard what God was saying, to believe what he was hearing about how Eli, who was effectively his boss, how Eli's family was going to fall into ruin - but God kept speaking.

And it must have been terribly painful for Eli to hear that his household was going to fall apart - but God kept speaking.

What made the difference in all of these instances is not so much that God kept speaking, but that God's people kept listening. They kept insisting on hearing the truth; they kept trying to understand what was real; they kept oriented towards God more than towards their own desires or understanding. And the truth finally won out.

It is something we must remember, especially in these days of loud voices, divisive rhetoric, and big lies - the power of truth is not to be found in the vocal capacities of those who shout loudest or most often, but in the steadfast continuity of principles and values worthy of life. These are the truths that have no need to be shouted out at high volume, which would only inflame closed minds to a heightened defense of their position; but these are the truths that must be continually and consistently expressed by lives following their lead.

For in the end, God keeps speaking until God is heard.

Meditation 2: "Calling the One Who Identifies"

Scripture Lesson 2: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

¹O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.
⁷Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
⁹If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.
¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"
¹²even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.
¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
¹⁶Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.
¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

In my work as a pastor, I have found certain scriptures to have an exceptional clarity about them regarding life as it is truly found to be. And nowhere is there a more profound truth expressed more accurately than in the phrase used by the psalmist in our passage today where he says, in reference to human beings, that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made." These days, I tend to get caught up in that "fearfully made" part, where there are so many examples of people behaving badly, tearing at each other with hatred and violence, interpreting reality in horribly skewed ways, full of hypocrisy and deceit, prejudice and greed...we are, in this respect, quite "fearfully made." One who faced this reality in all its ugliness and terror was the one we honor on Monday, which is Martin Luther King, Jr. day; his was a particularly relevant perspective on this dark side of humanity. In his book, Strength to Love, he describes the dubious nature of humankind as one who has seen both its hypocrisy and its destructiveness:

"One of the great tragedies of life is that men seldom bridge the gulf between practice and profession, between doing and saying. A persistent schizophrenia leaves so many of us tragically divided against ourselves. On the one hand, we proudly profess certain sublime and noble principles, but on the other hand, we sadly practice the very antithesis of these principles. How often are our lives characterized by a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds! We talk eloquently about our commitment to the principles of Christianity, and yet our lives are saturated with the practices of paganism. We proclaim our devotion to democracy, but we sadly practice the very opposite of the democratic creed. We talk passionately about peace, and at the same time we assiduously prepare for

war. We make our fervent pleas for the high road of justice, and then we tread unflinchingly the low road of injustice. This strange dichotomy, this agonizing gulf between the *ought* and the *is*, represents the tragic theme of man's earthly pilgrimage."

What a powerful way to understand our reality today - caught between what ought to be, and what actually is. So many people believing things they ought not to believe, doing things they ought not to do.....But lest I cast a downward glance towards others, I must confess I fully embody the potential of being a member of such a classification of humanity - and I would belong to such if I were to heed the lesser impulses of that which makes me who I am - in other words, I also have the seeds of hatred and violence, greed and prejudice, hypocrisy and deceit planted in my soul, as I believe all humans do.....but I have learned to resist their growth. God helps me in this, constantly, continually, without hesitation, as I avail myself to grace.

But God also helps me to gravitate towards the other side of that balance, whereas it says in our passage we are "wonderfully made." This is nothing less than salvation to me, and to anyone who has the courage to face who they truly are as a member of the human race. For though we all have the potential to succumb to our lesser selves, we also have the potential to rise towards our greater selves. And to our great relief, God not only favors the latter, but makes it possible for us to gravitate towards our better selves by allowing God's initiative to enter our lives. We call this faith - letting God's initiative work in our lives.

And how God is ready and willing to do so! This is made evident by the words of this psalm, which is practically poetic in its description of how God looks upon us with not just mercy and love, but with adoration and full embrace. We are of peculiar interest to the divine, we are the particular preoccupation of God, we are passionately pursued by the Lord. There's really no other way to put it -- God delights in us.

How much of the fearfully made side of humanity is due to the failure of that humanity to believe in its wonderfully made potential? How much of the depravity in the world exists because we fail to believe in the potential of others to rise above their lesser selves? And how many of our own self-esteem challenges exist because we listen more to a world saturated in competitive self-interest than to the truth of our innate worth which we each possess and

can recognize by grace? And....how much of that innate potential could be activated if we insisted upon seeing others as God sees us?

Patrick J. Willson is a retired Presbyterian pastor who lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico; his take on the main point of this Psalm is eloquently accurate. He says, "Knowing God as the one who knows us far beyond any desire we have to be known, we surrender finally to the wisdom that God can be known only in wonder and astonishment. Our knowing is not defeated so much as it is overflowing the too small cups we have brought to the table. To read Psalm 139 correctly is to lose any sure footing in God's heights, to have our breath taken away—and then to have it restored."

It is true: we are, each one of us, fearfully made. We each have great potential for hatred, violence, deceit, and a host of other vices. But God makes it clear we have a greater potential for living into our wonderful possibilities. Why is our potential for goodness greater than our potential for depravity? For the simple reason that all of us bear the imprint of our creator - and in that imprint is found the essence of God's goodness. God meant us for life, not death; God meant us for community, not division; God meant us for compassion, not competition; God meant us for love, not hate. And it is as we live into these, our better natures, that we discover God lives in us.