

“LISTEN TO THE SPIRIT” ©JoyceKelly

Sermon Notes for The Rev. Joyce Kelly

Supply Minister of Worship and Pastoral Care

Bloor Street United Church

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – June 13, 2010

Readings: Based on I Samuel 3:1-10 (see end of sermon) and Psalm 139

The story's told of days gone by,
 when Hope and Faith were thin,
Of a child who hears the call of God
 in Mystery's ancient voice,
Of an adult vowed to teach God's Way,
 now tired, with soul and sight grown dim.
So, listen now; let Light prevail;
 may God Eternal speak.

It is a time, corrupt and dark,
 with struggles over power.
Mistrust and madness rule the day,
 and hour after hour.
All hearts that would be faithful
 are weighted down with dread,

But God has not forgotten them
as they sleep in their bed.

A whisper of stillness speaks
into the centre of this maelstrom.

The child inside the temple
responds with "Here I am."

The sleepy adult says,
"Be quiet; shush; go back; lie down."

The child returns,
and lies again beside the Lamp of God.

Once more - the whisper nudges the child
there in the night;

Once more - his trusting spirit hears the call;

Once more - the adult says,
"Go way; lie down; I never called your name"

Once more - back to the Lamp of God.

Not once, or twice, but thrice it came
... that calling in the night;
until Old Eli's soul was stirred,
recalling days of yore
when Truth broke through

and Hope was strong,
... relationship was right.

Through the Lamp of God beside his life,

“Samuel” comes again.

“I know your name; you’re of my heart;

I formed you, made you whole;

I’m calling you - I’ve much for you to do.”

What can he do? God knows his name;

and faithfully guides his soul.

When Spirit speaks to spirit,

and calls us from our sleep

There’s really only one reply,

“Speak, God, your servant hears.” (poem by Joyce Kelly)

I

Tradition says that Samuel was 12 years old when the Spirit nudged his life, when poor old Eli didn’t know what was happening - the same age as Jesus, in that same Temple, when his parents didn’t know what was going on.

30 centuries of hindsight tells us that Samuel’s life from the beginning was destined for greatness, the kind of greatness God has in mind. But then, God always sets spiritual leaders upon this earth when we need them most, and never leaves us alone with our human limitations.

Jesus said, “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14), so you won’t forget who you are, whose you are, and what you’re to be about.

In its own poetic way, Genesis (23.21) tells us that as God sends us out of Eden’s garden of innocence to make our own way in the world, God also wraps protection around us (that it calls ‘skins of animals.’) As we go, we are clothed in God’s care, our lives wrapped round with God’s amazing, all-encompassing life-giving ways. When the world needs Light-workers, they appear. When a church needs a leader, the right one for that moment in time will be available. It’s the church’s job to prayerfully discern just exactly who God is calling to this place.

Remember how Hannah’s soul was crushed because she had no children – how she prayed continually, and put it before God? One year, on annual pilgrimage to the Temple, she slipped in all by herself, and Priest Eli saw her silently praying/crying/ praying – inconsolably. Thinking her drunk, he said, “How long do you plan to keep this up? Sober up, woman.” Hannah said, “It’s because I’m so desperately unhappy.”

Eli listened. Then he said, “Go in peace, and may God give you whatever you ask.” She said, “Pray for me.” Then (the story says) “She ate heartily, her soul at peace, her face radiant.”

Sure enough, before the year was out, Hannah gave birth to a son – who she named Samuel, which means “He who is from God.” She didn’t go to the Temple the next year, or the next, not until her son was weaned. But then she took him to the same old priest, and said “I am the woman who stood before you at this very spot, praying for this child. God gave me what I asked, so now I dedicate him to God, and bring him to you, (I wonder if old Eli was shocked?). I bring him, that he may serve God all his life.” I think the point is that Hannah entrusted the most precious part of her soul to the care of old Eli, to God’s purposes.

And so it was that Samuel grew up in the Temple, his mother, every year, bringing love-stitched garments to her ever-bigger son. God regularly uses the arms of those who love us – to wrap us round with love.

Always, God works in mysterious ways. As Samuel was born to barren Hannah, John to old Elizabeth, Jesus to young Mary, new life keeps coming where none is expected, a recurrent reminder of God's mystery-ways. New life surprises Hannahs and Elis of every generation.

The birth you desire - in your life, your family, your church's life, whatever new beginning you desire, like Hannah, give it over to God in prayer, and God's arms will wrap you round. Oh, maybe not in this literal way, but definitely in a real way. Ask and you shall receive - in God's time, in God's ways. Expect the unexpected.

II

But watch out for old Eli. He is alive and well. Eli is that half-asleep half-deaf part of us that has become so accustomed to 'the way things are' that we give up expecting - anything.

Eli is burnt out. His sons (priests after him in the patriarchal line) are corrupt in a church that has lost its way, embracing foreign gods and customs, (like rampant consumerism, secularism), in a world tossed by war and poverty, economic strife, dim hope. Desperation rules the day.

Eli has seen it all; he recognizes human nature's evil side, and doesn't expect anything to change. He's given up.

The clash of principalities and powers that shroud Eli's temple are still strong today.

The storyteller says that Eli's eyes are dim, his spiritual sight running out, like the night's supply of oil in the Lamp of God. Since Moses, the Lamp of God has burned every night, from sunset to sunrise - pure oil of beaten olives. Twelve-year-old Samuel sleeps by that lamp, close to the inner sanctuary where the most sacred object, the Ark of the Covenant, is kept. This child who God set in the midst of these people stays close to the Light.

Old Eli (and our name is Eli) has given up on God, and on humanity. But God has not given up on old Eli.

When night is heaviest, God speaks, "Samuel, Samuel." Gregory Baum calls this "an encroachment of the Spirit upon the stubborn defenses of our hard hearts and our laggard wills." Young Samuel runs to the old man to serve him - just as he's been taught.

"Here I am, for you called me" - ready to serve his old needs, to carry forward blind patterns of the past - just as he's been taught. Scary - what we teach our children!

3 times Samuel is called; 3 times he goes to old Eli, to see what he wants/needs; 3 times Eli sends him back to sleep by the Lamp of God – until finally some old instinct in Eli stirs – some old hope, expectation.

Can this really be happening? Is what he's wanted to believe all these years really true? He's heard the old stories – he knows them by heart – they have guided him all his life – but can miraculous ways of God be part of his day, his experience? Hope stirs his spirit, and when Samuel comes to him the third time in the night, the old man again sends him back to bed; but this time, it's different. Thank God for the not-quite-asleep soul of Eli.

"Go lie down," Eli says. "If you are called again, say, 'Speak Lord, for your servant hears.' Then, just listen." And, as old Eli learns a new thing, so

does Samuel – about being available to serve, not the old priest, not the old ways, but God, and God’s future – whatever that means – wherever it leads!

Eli teaches young Samuel well, “Let God do what seems good to God.” But, you: Listen! Be available!

Through the Lamp of God beside his life,

“Samuel” comes again.

“I know your name; you’re of my heart;

I formed you, made you whole;

I’m calling you - I’ve much for you to do.”

What can he do? God knows his name;

and faithfully guides his soul.

His better angels attuned to the whispering Spirit, Samuel lets no holy words fall to the ground. He nestles warm and safe in God’s cloak of care wrapped tightly round him – and all of us – for we are Samuel.

III

Inside of every one of us is that open expectant part that still trusts, still dreams, unspoiled by life’s old habits – and illusions.

I think that Jesus is the most disillusioned person who has ever lived. He has no illusions, sees the world’s ways clearly for what they are. Oh, that we be disillusioned like Jesus ... that our childlike, trusting hearts be so open and disillusioned.

Oh, that the Samuel-in-us may lead us forward. “Children arrive,” says Wordsworth, “trailing clouds of glory from whence they come.” Spiritually, instinctively, child-souls still know life’s natural rhythms, dance them with joy, and invite everyone to join in God’s fresh new ways. Just watch Nicholas’s eyes, soon his running feet – delight before the day, with each new discovery – inviting everyone he meets, everyone who will, to follow.

Listen to the children – and the child inside of every one of us. God never gives up calling our child-name, no matter how dark the night. So stay close to the Lamp of God! Listen – ready to respond to new ways and paths to which the Spirit is calling you right now.

Listen to the Spirit. Expect the unexpected. God always flips the world’s ways upside down.

“A little child shall lead them,” says Isaiah.

“Unless you become as a little child you shall not enter the kingdom of God,” says Jesus, whose church this is – Jesus, teacher of our soul, mentor of our days, nudger of our days, and whisperer in the night.

So – what is Jesus calling you to do, to be? – and this church? our children? this world? Listen! Pray! Expect the unexpected!

Sometimes She speaks in rhythm;

sometimes She speaks in rhyme;

Just LISTEN TO THE SPIRIT

who speaks into our time.

When Spirit speaks to spirit,
and calls us from our sleep

There's really only one reply,
"Speak, God, your servant hears."

To the glory of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN

Here's that wonderful old story of I Samuel 3:1-10.

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim, so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down within the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" And he 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. And the Lord called again "Samuel!" Samuel arose 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."

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

The Lord called Samuel again a third time, and he arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant hears.'"

So Samuel went and lay down in his place. And the Lord came and stood forth, calling as at other times, "Samuel, Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears."

May Spirit speak to our spirit.

And may we be servant, and truly hear.

Amen