

**Listen!**  
**1 Samuel 3: 1-11; 19-20**  
**James 1:19-25**  
**By Rev. Kathie Jackson**

A pastor friend from back in Iowa was sharing about all the happenings going on in the congregation he was serving – some building renovations along with trying to discern the church’s role in their changing urban setting. He was asked “How are you sleeping through all of this?” He answered “Oh I am sleeping like a baby. Every 3 or 4 hours I wake up screaming.”

Maybe you’ve been there a time or two. The great African American preacher, Gardner Taylor, who was known as the dean of American preaching, is quoted as saying “I’m for anything that helps a person get through the night!” to which I say “Amen!”

Most of us have probably had, at one time or another, periods in our life when restful sleep evades us. The number of commercials on TV for a better mattress or some type of sleep aid kind of tell the story about how many of us long for a good night’s sleep.

The troubles of the day can inhabit our dreams. Our fears, our worries, our regrets can play on a continuous loop, not allowing our exhausted minds to shut out the noise. I’m curious though how many of us, if any, spend restless nights because God keeps whispering in our ear. Would we even recognize those nighttime whispers as coming from God?

A long time ago there was a young boy named Samuel. He had been promised to serve the Lord by his mother before he was born. He lived under the care of the priest Eli. Samuel’s nighttime resting place was right next to the ark of the covenant. Even though he was so close to that holy place neither Samuel or Eli expected to hear directly from God and so they could not immediately recognize God’s voice in the nighttime whispers. Of course, the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. It seems that in the midst of everyday life no one was listening for God; no one expected to hear from God.

Well, just because no one expected to hear from God did not mean that God wasn’t speaking. God calls out to Samuel, but Samuel believes it is the priest Eli calling out, so Samuel keeps running to Eli saying, “Here I am” and Eli keeps saying “Go back to sleep kid. You are imagining things. You are just dreaming.”

Eli could have been sort of right about that – at least the part about Samuel dreaming. God could have been speaking to Samuel in his dreams. Maybe Samuel had been dreaming about the way things in Israel could be, or should be, only it seemed that no one knew how to move Israel from where they were to where they should be as the people of God. And no one was taking the time to ask God about such things or taking the time to listen for God to speak. After all, they believed that the word of God was rare in those day; visions were not widespread.

Well, God seems to understand that one of the best times to get someone to listen is in the middle of the night, a time when our guard is down, and we are more open or vulnerable to God invading our dreams. Sometimes dreams can be a vehicle for creative answers to problems.

Apparently, this happened to Isaac Merritt Singer, the inventor of the Singer sewing machine. The story goes that his creditors had given him a couple of weeks to complete his

invention, or they would pull their financial support. So one night he went to sleep full of anxiety and dreamed about being out in a jungle surrounded by cannibals. The boiling pot was real. His hands were tied. As his captors came toward him, he saw the faces of his creditors and saw they were holding spears ready to finish him off when suddenly he noticed the holes in the points of the spears and he woke up with the answer of how to complete the Singer machine.

Yes, sometimes dreams can be a source of creativity. Scripture is full of stories about dreamers. Joseph was a dreamer who also knew how to interpret the dreams of others like Pharaoh. There was the prophet Ezekiel who looked out over a valley of dry bones and saw them come to life. Mary's husband Joseph had a dream that caused him to take Mary and the infant Jesus to Egypt to keep them safe.

In the night Samuel keeps hearing voices, and he runs to Eli and at first Eli doesn't take any of this seriously. He says, "Go back to sleep." William Carl, former president of Pittsburgh seminary, points out that the world and the church often says to dreamers "Go back to sleep. Go back to sleep Moses, you are dreaming. Go back to sleep Ghandi, you are dreaming. Go back to sleep Martin Luther King Jr, you are dreaming. Go back to sleep Mother Teresa, you are dreaming. Go back to sleep Bishop Tutu, you are dreaming."

The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread, so it took 3 tries for Eli and Samuel to catch on. Only on the 4<sup>th</sup> attempt did Samuel respond with "Speak Lord for your servant is listening." Samuel finally listened and as he grew up, he also grew into the nighttime call of God, and he kept on listening to God and to God's people.

But as is so often the case, Samuel found himself hearing words he didn't want to hear. The people came to him and said "You are an old man Samuel and your sons – they are good for nothings. We want something different; we want a new leader – get us a king. All the nations around us have an earthly king and we want one too. We want to be just like everyone else."

Sometimes listening means being open to hearing messages we really don't like. Samuel didn't like what he was hearing from the people but in the wisdom of his many years he responded by taking this to God and listening for God's direction. God said "Listen to the people Samuel. They are not rejecting you. They are rejecting me and my rule, just like they have done so many times before. Warn them of the dangers that will come from living under the rule of an earthly king and then give them what they want." God gives his people freedom to choose how they will live.

So, Samuel goes looking for a king and receives a word from God that Saul is the guy. Saul isn't looking to be king; in fact, on the day that Samuel runs into Saul, Saul is looking for his father's donkeys and not for a crown. Still, Saul ends up being anointed king and so begins one of the most tragic stories in Scripture because Saul never fully lives into his calling to be king. He never seems to really want to be king, but he doesn't seem to want to give up being king. In the course of his reign, he refuses to listen to Samuel or to other advisors. He won't listen, he won't follow advice, and he ends up a tortured and tragic figure.

If there is anything we can learn from this period of Israel's history it may be that as important as it is to listen, it is also important that we are obedient in carrying out the instructions or directives we are given. Both listening and acting require courage. The writer of James knew

this “Be doers of the word and not merely hearers. Do not forget what you hear but act and you will be blessed in your doing.” It’s not always easy to hear; it is certainly not always easy to act.

Wm. Carl points out that maybe it is hard to hear and hard to respond to God because we really aren’t ready for God to come into our bedrooms and into our dreams and into our innermost selves. We will try to scrub up for Sunday but don’t ever call on us in the middle of the night or in our business or our marriages or our friendships or even in our church. Please Lord we are not ready for that. We might say speak Lord for your servant is listening but are we really ready for what God might say?

We may be afraid to listen because deep down we are aware of how broken we are and how broken the world is and if we say speak Lord for your servant is listening, maybe God will do just that. Maybe God will come into our dreams and give us a vision that will carry us to places we would really rather not go or call on us to confront problems with no easy answers. Perhaps we are afraid because if we believe, really believe that God still speaks today, well then, it is possible that in a world with too much violence God could give one of us a vision of how to be a peacemaker. In a country full of partisan politics God could speak to one of us a word of clarity. In churches that fear the future God could grant a vision of how we are called to live free from fear even when it means taking risks.

Well God has spoken. God has spoken in Jesus Christ. Jesus knew the cost of listening to God and answering the call by saying “Here I am.” Again, quoting what Wm Carl writes “at the temptation Jesus said, ‘Here I am, torn between ambitions and obedience.’ At the tomb of Lazarus Jesus said, ‘here I am broken and weeping.’ At the Mount of Olives Jesus said, ‘Here I am, wanting this cup to pass from me.’ On the cross, during the worst nightmare of all Jesus was torn ‘My God, my God why has thou forsaken me?’ but at the end he was one with the Father, at peace. Picture him praying that old Jewish prayer that a child would pray before dropping off to sleep, ‘Into thy hand I commit my spirit.’ Here I am Lord. I am yours completely and fully.”

It may seem that the word of the Lord is rare in these days and visions are not widespread and yet, could the truth be that most of us have forgotten the practice of how to listen for God to speak. In the coming weeks and months as your interim pastor comes to serve this congregation you all will be called upon to listen. You will be called to listen to Pastor Osborn as he guides you through this interim time. You will be called to listen to one another as you share your hopes and dreams. Most of all, you will need to listen for God’s voice coming to you in the Scriptures, in worship, in prayer, in the gathered community and yes, perhaps even in your dreams. You will be called to listen for the voice of Jesus inviting you to come and follow him into God’s vision of abundant life here at Trinity Presbyterian. May your hearts, minds and spirits be open to listening well and then following where Jesus leads.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen