

The word of the Lord was rare in those days, visions were not widespread.

And then Samuel, born of barren Hannah, dedicated from birth to serve God in the temple, gets awakened in the middle of the night by the voice of God which he mistakes for the voice of his teacher.

The word of the Lord was rare in those days, visions were not widespread.

Eli, the teacher, a failure as a father, about to see his priestly line shut down, eliminated because he was unable to discipline his sons, got it right in this moment. In his blind old age, he still knew how to hear the divine voice and mentor the boy. He instructs Samuel “When God calls your name, this is what you say: ‘Speak, Lord, for your Servant is listening.’”

Eli is teaching a life lesson. When the Lord calls you by name, you get quiet and listen: even if what you are about to hear is hard; even if you have to deliver bad news to someone you trust and love and have served for years; even if you are inexperienced and don't know what you are doing.

Samuel does as Eli says. And with this hearing, this listening, is catapulted into being the last judge of Israel, a priest, a prophet, a maker of kings. It ends up that Samuel as well cannot control his sons, that Samuel himself will have to do hard many hard things in his life, yet during his whole life he follows God and listens to God's voice.

Perhaps the word of the Lord seems rare in our day and as if visions are not widespread.

Yet the psalmist tells us that we were knit together in our mother's womb by God, that

our very frame was not hidden from God when we were made, that God knows when we sit down and when we rise up, before a word is on our tongues, God knows it altogether.

How can the Word of the Lord be rare when God is so intimate, when God knows us, when God planned our births, when who we are is not random at all?

The problem with the secular culture around us is that it separates secular from sacred, as if there are portions of life that are apart from divinity, as if there is our human part and our spiritual part, as if we can look at the cells of our bodies and separate out what is of creation (which is divine) and what is not.

We spend our lives like Nathanael, perhaps, arguing about what is Jesus and who is Jesus and where Jesus came from, but at the moment that God speaks to us directly, tells us

who we are, tells us our name, our arguments cease.

Being a disciple and making others disciples like we see in the gospel is about invitation.

Someone invites me to see what is true and sacred and whole. Someone like Eli comes along and tells me that when I sense the divine voice, I should listen. And I respond to the invitation.

Samuel was called to a specific task at a specific time in the history of Israel to do very specific things. Nathanael was called from his life as a student to become the student of a new teacher. And so are we. We are called by name at our specific time, in our life, to live and be in the life we have. As it unfolds, little by little, as we listen to the guidance from within, the nature of our unfolding purpose or multiple purposes unfold. We listen for the voice of God.

We say ,over and over, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

The voice of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread.

This is not true in our day. According to the Pew report on religious observance in September of 2017, only 18% of the population states that they are neither spiritual nor religious. The other 82% call themselves one or the other or both.

Even those who say that they are religious or spiritual struggle with this reality of listening for the voice of God and with the issue of being called to anything, having a purpose in life. It is so easy to get distracted from the basics, it is so easy to not believe that our lives have meaning, to doubt that we are here with a guidance system, that we are knit together our mother’s womb with intention.

Yet, over and over again as I read non-religious and religious material alike, as I listen to folks talk about how to live life, how to find one's way, how to get to the nugget of a life of integrity and meaning and coherence, invariably the teaching comes down to slowing down, to focusing, to delving into mystery, to listening deeply to what is unfolding, to respond to what comes from inside with a willingness to follow the wisdom given. Much of this is not in religious language, but the truth of the matter is that lots of people, in lots of walks of life, are parsing out how to listen to the voice of God.

It tickles me that God is persistent, that God will speak so that everyone can hear.

Is the word of the Lord rare and visions not widespread or is the word of the Lord bursting forth always and all we need do is listen for our

name to be called, like Nathanael or Samuel,
and say “speak, Lord, for your servant is
listening?”