

The Bible shows us that God often works in ways and places we don't expect - through a prophet offering hope to a people in exile, in a stable in Bethlehem. The Bible shows that God can use people we don't expect: persons who falter, who doubt, who sin, but who somehow manage to keep in sight the fact that God is indeed their only lasting strength.

Incredibly, the Bible also promises us that God is working in and through our lives today-- calling us to some new--as yet unknown--mission. Your suffering need not be in vain, your sadness will turn to joy. The pressures and pains and possibilities of this day may loom all around you, seemingly the most important and enticing things in life. But we are warned not to cling too tightly though to the things of this day or of this age, for these will pass away. We are challenged and called to set our sights elsewhere: A light has come to all the nations, it has come to light your life, to bring you hope, and to challenge you to be God's light for all brothers and sisters everywhere. Too often, we who are Christian miss out on the adventure of listening for God's calls to us.

Years ago a man lived in Canada, where he had labored in coal mines six days a week. He would work from before sun-up to after sunset, so that not a day passed during the week where he was able to see a ray of sunshine. On Sunday's, he got to see the sun. “Sunday” meant more to him than just a day of rest, a day of worship, or a day to change pace: it was the day that he got to see the sun.

There is much in life that we miss. Perhaps we miss things because of our schedules, but more likely we miss these things because we simply don't notice them or we take them for granted. Good health must be one of the most overlooked, an uncounted blessing of our lives, until we no longer possess it. Our families are probably the next... The list goes on and on. There is so much we do not “take in” in life.

What about God? Do we say to God, “Speak, Lord, for your servant listens?” Are we willing to hear? Do we really believe that God has a purpose for our lives? Do we watch to see how God will place opportunities for us to help someone right before us? Do we consider ourselves called to serve God in our lives? I've heard folks say “It's too bad God doesn't get involved the way he did back in biblical times.”

Way back in the days of the old priest, Eli, the days were dark. Folks had pretty much stopped listening for God's voice, and even the priesthood had become corrupt. Old Eli had lost his vision, spiritually as well as literally, and his sons were rotten, not caring at all about God. The Bible says that “the word of the Lord” was seldom heard in those days...

The Bible says that elderly Hannah and her husband, Elkanah, had yearned for a baby, but into their old age they had none. So Hannah had prayed desperately to God for a child, and had vowed to God that if she had a child, she would give him to God, to serve God. God gave her a

child, and Hannah was faithful to her word. When Samuel was old enough to be weaned, she took him and gave him to the old priest, Eli, to be brought up at the temple.

Time passed, and one night young Samuel was trying to sleep when he heard his name being called. Verse 3 of today's passage tells us 'the lamp of God had not yet gone out.' Everybody was sleeping, but a light still flickered. God was not completely absent. The truth of this was realized as God spoke to and through the boy, Samuel.

This weekend we observe the anniversary of the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. When I was growing up in Alabama, lots of folks didn't like Dr. King; they thought he was a communist, they didn't like the fact that he was challenging the status quo. Dr. King had his share of anguish and faced the darkness of ignorance and hatred on several fronts. Even so, Dr. King believed that God had called him and had a mission for him to carry out. God gave him the dream, and God also provided him with the abilities necessary and the courage and perseverance needed to make a forceful statement to an entire nation. In the midst of discouragements, Martin Luther King, Jr., believed that God's lamp had not gone out. He perceived the call, and he would not deny it.

In his own words: "The agonizing moments through which I have passed during the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever I am convinced of the reality of a personal God. True, I have always believed in the personality of God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life. In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calm. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying, 'Lo, I will be with you.' When the chains of fear and the manacles of frustration have all but stymied my efforts, I have felt the power of God transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope." (*Strength to Love*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963, 154.)

Did you notice the Psalm we read as our Call to Worship today? I usually omit a responsive reading of Psalm 139, because of the harsh verses where the psalmist talks about hating God's enemies. But this Psalm, and several others, show how a profound relationship with God can exist side-by-side with deep anger or even the impulse to hate others. God works with imperfect people!

The Psalmist understood with amazement the fact that God knows all our frustrations, fears, resentments, temptations, and hopes. And that God can look into our future as easily as God can see our pasts or just where we are right now. God knows our struggles and our mistakes, our successes, and what will break our hearts. Everything.

Psalm 139 concludes: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (RSV) The God who would put us to work knows us through and through; God knows who we really are and what we really need.

What would God have us hear today? Long ago, God spoke a huge and difficult message to a small boy, Samuel. Centuries later, Jesus called some very ordinary men, telling them that they would see and do great things in his name. Both scriptures would remind us that God's call often involves folks WE might not predict. God appears to enjoy working through ordinary, easily overlooked or rejected "little" people. So if we're thinking, "I'm not an important person, for I'm just a – housewife, janitor, student, jobless person... So God couldn't be interested in me. Think again!!

In a sermon in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther confronted a congregation who complained that they never heard God's call. He urged them to look at the most common instruments of their labors and suggested that precisely there they would hear a "call." Luther chided them, "Look at your tools, your needle, your thimble, your beer barrel,...your scales, your measures, and you will find this saying written on them....: 'My dear, use me toward your neighbor as you would want him to act toward you with what is his.'" (*Luther on Vocation*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957, p. 72)

A little boy sleeping on his bunk at the temple, Samuel heard God's summons, and through the guidance of the old priest Eli, who had just about forgotten how to listen for God, became able to hear God tell him that God was about to use him in a mighty way. The unlikely, unexpected call turned Samuel's life into a powerful instrument through which God worked in Israel.

What about us? Our world today is filled with fear over violence, recently heightened by Muslim extremists who make us afraid and by Christian extremists who too often seem to be more into condemning others than living out lives that speak of love and show the ways of Jesus. Is God asking us to "come and see" the power of Christ's love and to hear God's whisper even in the midst of this fast-paced, competitive, throw-a-bomb world? This wonderful Samuel/Eli story keeps this question right in front of us, whether we're thinking that our lives are pretty much over or are just starting a new job or feeling the need for something more meaningful in our lives. Can God be calling? Does the God of all Creation want to use *me* in some way?

Several years ago I read the book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*. This book is an account of visits between an old, dying professor and his 37 year-old former student, Mitch. The dying man shared a wealth of understanding with his younger friend, a portion of which seems worth hearing today.

*Morrie believed in the inherent good of people. But he also saw what they could become.*

*"People are only mean when they're threatened," Morrie said later that day, "and that's what our culture does. That's what our economy does. Even people who have jobs in our economy are threatened, because they worry about losing them. And when you get threatened, you start looking out only for yourself. You start making money a god. ...The problem, Mitch, is that we don't believe we are as much alike as we are. Whites and blacks, Catholics and Protestants, men and women. {Perhaps today we'd say Muslim, Jew, Christian, straight, gay, wealthy, jobless, conservative, liberal – whatever divides us – fte} If we saw each other as more alike, we*

*might be very eager to join in one big human family in this world, and to care about that family the way we care about our own.*

*“But believe me, when you are dying, you see that it is true. We all have the same beginning - birth - and we all have the same end - death. So how different can we be?”*

*(Tuesdays with Morrie, New York: Doubleday, 1997, p. 154-55)*

Look at your tools, your gifts, your “box of crayons”: your hands, your brains, your computer, your car, your cell phone, your knitting needles, your management skills, your artistic abilities, your sense of humor, your strong sense of what is right, your compassion, your ability to teach, your willingness to listen to someone else... Look at your life: Nothing you deal with this day or any day is too insignificant to be put to use by God!

May we HEAR what our God would have us hear in our lives today; may our ears be opened to God’s call and our hearts become perceptive to God’s mission. May we SEE what is important to our Lord and be more and more willing to let our lives be part of his action in this world today. By this, there will be light, people will come to see and hear, and the Word of the Lord will fill this land with justice and hope. Thanks be to God! Amen.