

And Now, A Message from Our Sponsor

1 Samuel 3: 1-11 John 1: 43-51

“And now we interrupt your regularly scheduled program for a message from our sponsor.” Ugh. Invariably we hear this from the emcee with a certain measure of dread.

The only thing that brings me joy is the GEICO commercial with fictional retired football player Ickey Woods celebrating getting his number called at the deli counter. (If you haven't seen it, or want to see it one more time – frankly I can't get enough – this is the link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFrsR9NByc4>.) I've seen the ad a hundred times and I laugh at it *every single time*.

Otherwise, we're likely to get an ad for the latest drug on the market as gauzy images of happy people enjoying their everyday lives plays on the screen while the voiceover intones all of the hazardous side effects. I would be okay never seeing another one of those ads.

This is the business model for commercial television, how they pay for that show that you enjoy watching. These interruptions are expected by anyone who has watched TV, but they're never welcome. As the story builds, we keep getting our attention yanked away every ten minutes or so for a several minute diversion. The pattern repeats throughout the entire daily cycle of programming. Even with the program recorded and having the ability to fast forward through the ads, it's still a pain in the neck.

Whatever the circumstance, if it's something new, I'd really like some warning about what's coming. Otherwise I'm easily confused, become irritated, and we already know that I'm prone to throwing things after crossing a certain threshold of frustration. New interrupts old, familiar, and customary, and I don't like that either. I'm old, cynical, and grumpy, and so are most of you.

We don't want anything appearing to us when we've gotten “into” something. If I'm watching my show, I don't want to have the dog staring at me, “telling” me to do something for him. I don't want to hold a conversation while I'm reading a book, or worse, no chit-chat while I'm reading the instructions that came with that thing saying “some assembly required” on the box. And I don't want to be awakened by anything at night, except my natural reservoir limitations and the relieving thereof.

You might have guessed that I have great sympathy for the interrupted sleep of Eli, the priest, by young Samuel. Before delving into that part of the story, we should appreciate how the story gets set up.

We already know the story about barren Hannah, her deal with God, the birth of Samuel, and Samuel's eventual commitment to serving the temple with old Eli, as per her covenant with God. We've also learned that Eli's two sons were wicked, corrupt scoundrels, certainly not role models for any worthy behavior. Eli seems to be either committed to being “unaware” – I see nothing; I know nothing – or refuses to act to

control their evil behavior. Either way, God is not happy with old Eli, yet this is the guy to whom Samuel has been entrusted, and under whose tutelage Samuel will grow, learn, and mature.

Our chapter 3 starts in verse 2: *In those days, the word of the Lord was **rare**; there were **not** many visions.* It would seem that communications between God and God's people was virtually non-existent. Perhaps God has stopped sharing his word with a people that has shown such indifference, even hostility to God's word, as in the case of Eli's sons. This perceived withdrawal by God would also explain a cessation of visions, as people see what they see and nothing more, and hear what they hear and nothing more, descriptive of a rather flat, uninspired environment.

On the other hand, it may be that God's people no longer listen for the word of God, and no longer expect visions. God has become a fixture of weekly ritual life, kind of like having a lamp to put on when the sun goes down, but nothing more. For the people, God is nothing upsetting, disturbing, or attention-getting, and also nothing inspiring, life-changing, or gracious. The people of God would appear to be shut off from the source of life.

Then again, with God set aside, everything is rather routine, predictable, and ordinary. Good or bad, life is what it is, and there is no sense dwelling on it. Whatever will be, will be, *que sera, que sera.*

Amid this suffocating **lack** of dynamism and creativity and imagination, there is a scene played out in the temple at night. *At night*, of course, the time when consciousness lapses and the unconscious idles the physical and spiritual. The body asleep is the state of society that has removed its connectivity with the message of God's word and the vision of God's way.

We're also re-introduced to old Eli. You won't be surprised that old Eli is weak, rather inert, and quite blind. He is quite relatable to the society as a whole; weak, inert, and blind. His sons, Hophni and Phineas, represent the active elements of society, its leading members, mired in sexual scandal and financial corruption, thoroughly abusing their positions of trust simply to satisfy their own personal desires, and facing no accountability for their unbridled sinfulness.

As Hannah was barren, so is the society of which Eli and his sons are exemplary. Yet God acted in covenant with Hannah, for she remained faithful, a witness amid the forsaken, a light amid the darkness. God brought life to overcome Hannah's barrenness. It's a reminder that God is still sovereign, even though no one listens, no one sees, no one truly cares. Similarly, the text says *the lamp of God had not yet gone out* – whether speaking about the literal lamp in the temple, or about the figurative light of God's revealing in the darkness of the world. God is sovereign, God is working.

Though asleep, Samuel is not like all the rest who slumber in semi-consciousness throughout their lives. We know that Samuel *grew up in the presence of the Lord* (2:21b), and *continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men.*

(2:26). Samuel is the one who will hear God's word and will see God's way. But it may take some time to get the hang of it.

God calls Samuel's name, the servant known to God, the servant who is worth speaking to. Twice Samuel believes it is old Eli calling out for him. After the third time, something awakens in old, useless Eli and he realizes the Lord God is calling the boy. Eli tells Samuel what to say: *Speak, for your servant is listening*. Eli had long ago stopped listening for God, and God may have stop trying with Eli, too. In any case, Eli eventually "awakens" and makes his own small witness to God that leads Samuel to behold the words and the way of the Lord, setting his course as one who served God faithfully throughout his life.

God's address awakened old Eli, reminding the one without vision, who had forgotten the story, who had no expectation of God appearing at any time, that God has a word and a way, and God will act to make it happen.

As we turn to John's gospel, Jesus is in John the Baptist's community, and has met Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. In our passage, Jesus has now called Philip to join him. Philip, Andrew and Peter are all from Bethsaida on the northeast coast of the Sea of Galilee. Philip found Nathanael, who may also have been from Bethsaida, about Jesus of Nazareth.

Nathanael is shocked. *Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?* Having the messiah from God, the Promised One, come from the lawless outback region of Galilee seemed absurd. Criminals, revolutionaries, extremists, and nutters were the types that you got out of Galilee. Oh, this guy may **think** he's the messiah, and he may be **telling** everyone he's the messiah, but really? This guy's from Galilee? You don't take those people seriously.

Philip persists, saying: *Come and see [for yourself]*. Jesus greets Nathanael with unusual familiarity, even exuberance. Nathanael is taken back a bit by this greeting. Jesus explains that he had seen Nathanael earlier. This mild response produces a strange outburst from Nathanael: *Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel*.

Nathanael's comment was pretty over-the-top by any standard. It wasn't like Jesus had done anything in the least remarkable. In reply, Jesus questions this outburst of enthusiastic belief by Nathanael, and pivots on the question of belief in Jesus. Such belief, Jesus says, will bring Nathanael into contact with the truly eye-popping. Nathanael will see heaven itself open up, and he'll see *angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man*, just like it was described in Jacob's Ladder in Genesis.

Now Jesus may have been speaking literally. However, it's more likely Jesus is describing how Nathanael will behold the closure of the gap between heaven and earth through Jesus and his teaching, his ministry, and his life. Nathanael can be shown what is holy, good, and true, how it can be *on earth as it is in heaven*. This will come through the Son of Man, through Jesus bringing the word of God and the vision for God's way.

In our readings from scripture this morning, we're encouraged to listen, listen closely for the word of God that interrupts our regularly scheduled programming. God can appear in word and vision, through hearing and seeing, to awaken us to the word and the way that is holy and worthy of praise, revealing blessing and grace.

Our regularly scheduled programming puts our lives in a fairly predictable track. In the humdrum, we can sleep walk, pretending that God, too, is simply in the background, doing background kinds of things. Yet God has a word for you and for me, and a vision for you and for me. May we welcome the interruption when it comes, recognize the appearance of what is holy and sacred, giving thanks while listening, knowing that God is sovereign and active in our lives. May we be good partners, not fast forwarding through the interruption to continue whatever we were doing. God has a word for you.