

Here I Am (1 Samuel 3. 1-10)

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We are in the season of the church's year that is called 'Epiphany'. Epiphany is a Greek word meaning 'manifestation' or 'appearing', from 'epi' meaning 'upon' and 'phaino' meaning 'to shine'. Ever since Christmas, the readings set for each week have been speaking of how light shines upon and radiates from the person of Jesus – thus identifying him as the manifestation of God's presence on earth, the appearing of divinity among us. Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, had prophesied his birth, saying: 'by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace' (Luke 1.78-79). And so, Scripturally speaking, it has been: the star shining in the night sky, guiding the Magi until it rested over the place 'where the child was' (Matthew 2.10); the aged Simeon in the temple, recognising in the infant Jesus 'the light for revelation to the Gentiles' (Luke 2.32); and last week, the heavens torn apart, the dove alighting and the voice announcing Jesus as God's beloved Son, at his baptism. This whole light-saturated season of Epiphany concludes in a few weeks' time with the story of the Transfiguration, that moment of astonishing illumination, where Jesus' clothes become dazzling white (Mark 9.3), his face shines like the sun (Matthew 17.2) and the disciples see fully at last his glory, 'glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth' (John 1.14).

Part of the power of this symbolism in the gospel stories is the understanding that there are times in the life of God's people where God's presence is not so obviously manifest; times when the light has dimmed and the voice become hard to hear. Such a time is being remembered in our reading from the book of Samuel, for 'in those days', we're told 'the word of the Lord was rare, visions were not widespread' – or, as another translation puts it, 'there was no widespread vision'. It was in fact a bleak period in Israel's history. According to the book of Samuel, the

official prophet of the Lord, Eli, is father to corrupt sons, who routinely abuse those come to worship. They desecrate the people's sacrifices (1 Samuel 2. 12-17) and force the women serving at the shrine to sleep with them. Access to God is being stymied by those who are supposed to be God's ministers, and God is about to do something about it.

Our text, then, marks the beginning of the transition of the prophetic mantle from Eli to Samuel – who, like Jesus, is a child of miraculous birth. But in this superb little story, we're given not just a bare account of prophetic succession, but a rich spiritual teaching about what's involved in recognising and responding to God's appearing, God's leading. And this seems worth pondering at the beginning of this new year, as we too seek to discern the presence and action of God in our lives and in our world.

The first thing I noticed reading the story, and it surprised me, was the extraordinary emphasis on 'lying down' – did you notice? Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see (and that seems a pretty significant metaphor), was lying down in his room; meanwhile, Samuel is also lying down in the temple of the Lord. The Lord calls, 'Samuel, Samuel' and he runs to Eli, who tells him to 'lie down again'. A second and a third time, Samuel runs to Eli mistaking the Lord's call for his, and a second and third time, he is told to 'lie down again'. Six times in 9 verses, Samuel or Eli lies down – and in a story about the call to prophetic action, that seems like a lot of lying about. What might we make of it?

Well ... 'lying down' suggests a kind of liminality. It characterises that relaxed, slightly ill-defined state of being between full wakefulness and being completely out of it (notice Eli doesn't tell Samuel to 'go back to sleep'). When we lie down we slow down, we let down – not only our bodies, but our minds. New thoughts occur, unexpected connections, dreamy messages ... Could it be that recognising God's presence, hearing God's call involves having our grip loosened on the way we hold things, and know things, the way we know ourselves? [*whisper*] *Samuel...Samuel...* As with the posture, the practice of contemplation, lying down involves a kind of letting

go ... but not completely. It's like an intentional passivity – a posture of vulnerability, susceptibility... that opens the way for God.

This image of 'lying down' suggests also that at certain times in life, there may be nothing more we can 'do' to make God happen or discern our way. We've come as far as we can under our own steam, and all that's left is to rest, to wait on a deeper knowing or clarity. This story is set in a liminal time. We're told that the lamp of the Lord, which has been burning in the sanctuary all night, has not yet gone out. So it's just before dawn, on the cusp of day. Moreover, Eli has recently been told by God that his family is under judgement because of the corruption of his two sons. The priesthood of Israel will be taken away from him, his sons will die. So what does Eli do? He lies down. And when eventually he realises that Samuel is being addressed by God, his instruction to him is the same – go back to your place, lie down, wait. Any action, at this point, must be God's action; any activity of ours must proceed from God's initiative, from being called. Just as, in the story of Jesus' calling the disciples, the initiative is entirely with him.

Yet, as the story also suggests, hearing the voice of God, recognising the call, is itself no straightforward matter. How do we know it's God and not a figment of our dreaming mind, the product of over-heated imagination or grandiose delusion? What does *God's* voice sound like? Three times, Samuel mistakes it for the voice of his master Eli – and it's only because the old man sets him straight that the action can proceed. This says to me that we need help hearing truly – we need each other. We rely on each other's capacity to attend with us, to notice what is happening in and around us – as individuals and as communities. This is the shared work of spiritual discernment, which sometimes takes the form of a question – have you thought of this? Sometimes an observation – you seem to come alive when ..., we keep coming back to, it looks like there's life emerging here. With attentive noticings like these, we encourage each other in deeper listening, we companion each other in the way of God and become more fully available for the mission of God unfolding through us.

But then, if you're like earnest little me, you worry – what if I've missed it? What if I haven't picked up the cues, or if I've mis-heard at some fundamental level

and am now mistaken, or unfaithful, or lost? Here, the very earthy, almost comical story of Samuel's call is deeply reassuring. The patience of God, the gracious persistence of God who speaks over and over again until he finally gets it. *Like Jesus being undeterred by Nathanael's initial cynicism and luke-warmness.* There is not only one chance, and there is not only one path. If we are even half-listening and open, then (in the fullness of time) we hear.

So, I wonder how this story speaks to each of you and to us as a community of faith, as we move through the rather liminal month of January – on the cusp of fully re-engaging the year and all our activities? Still perhaps in that slightly relaxed state of being, with hopefully a bit more lying about ahead of us – whether it's in front of the cricket or the tennis or by the river or in the garden – yet also aware of the hopes we bear, the challenges facing us personally and as a world. What are we hearing? What whispers or intimations of God's call are stirring within and among us?

One final feature of this story seems significant – and that's to do with Samuel's dauntless readiness to respond. Three times, Samuel thinks his master has called him, and three times he gets up for seemingly no purpose or point. Eli hadn't called and Samuel has gotten out of bed for nothing. Yet every time, he answers in exactly the same words: 'Here I am, for you called me'. There's no hint of frustration in his tone, no being fed up with the lack of outcome from his responsiveness. Just a consistent and generous willingness to show up, to be present and available. That generous, humble readiness can be hard to sustain: especially when direction is unclear or when the response we think we're asked to make goes nowhere; when there's no obvious way for our hopes to be realised, or when life's circumstances seem to close us in and the future seems bereft of possibility. But the radical vision of faith is that in God there is always a future, even if we can't yet see it – and that in the end, our readiness is what matters. Our 'here I am', 'here we are', is the faithful echo of God's 'I am with you' – that promise we celebrated at Christmas and in the light of which we live.