

The Practice of Being Present to God
1 Sam. 3:1-18
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In the demanding world in which we live, it is difficult to be present to much of anything. We hear our partner, child, neighbor talking to us but we aren't really listening. We have the television, radio, music on in the background but we aren't tuned into what is being played or said. Even the time we set apart, assuming we do so, to pray and reflect is filled with our own voices, our own concerns, our own agendas, so much so that there is no time, no space for God. In a time and culture where we are expected to attend to many things and people simultaneously, it is quite the challenge to be present to any one thing, much less to be present to God.

We've been talking about "practicing our faith"—about waking up to God, encountering others, getting lost, living with purpose, saying no, feeling pain. Just like everything else, our faith requires practice if we intend to be very good at it! It doesn't just "happen" to us and for us; we must *cultivate* our life with God. And so we end this series with the invitation to deepen our attention and focus on God, with the struggle to be present with and to and for God, for it is only when we begin to engage this aspect of our divine-human relationship that we begin to deepen our commitment and faith.

Samuel is listening! Perhaps it's because he is so young, not yet distracted by the noise and chaos of the world around him. Perhaps it's because he's trying to be useful, away from home and family in service to the temple priest. Perhaps it's because he is wondering about his purpose and his future that he is listening, in the early morning hours, just before the dawn.

Samuel hears a voice, speaking to him, calling his name! And he responds! “Here I am, Lord!” he eagerly replies, hurrying to Eli, ready to please. But it is not Eli who has called him and he returns to his bed, wondering perhaps what it was he actually heard, attentive and alert once again. Three times Samuel hears the voice and it is Eli who discerns that what he hears is none other than the voice of God. “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And Samuel hears...God.

I wonder, when I lie awake at 4:30 in the morning, if *I* would ever hear God speaking to me over the roar of the noise in my own head, listing off the things I have left undone, the people I have not called or am worried about, the over-full agenda of the coming day. I wonder if my heart is attuned enough, if I can be quiet enough, if I desire enough to hear God’s voice that I could respond like Samuel, “here I am.”

Being present is a difficult thing—even to those who are standing right in front of us; how much more difficult is it to be present to a God we do not see and don’t often hear? Eli invites Samuel to be attentive, to be fully present to the possibility that what he hears is the very voice of God, speaking to him! What an exciting possibility! What a disturbing possibility: to think that God might be present, even speaking to us, and we do not hear because God is waiting for *us* to be present too. What does it take to become present to God? I think it requires our *desire* to be present, as well as our openness to do so.

I confess that I have difficulty sitting in one place for too long, waiting for God. I’m a doer, and so I seek God, for better or worse, while I am on the move. I have learned, over the years, to make use of my driving and commuting time to engage the Divine, to

seek the Holy—with my eyes wide open as my heart. I try, every day, to invite God into what space I find myself in—whether it’s the classroom or the board room or the family room or my office space or the gym. Some days I feel more connected than others; but my hope is to try. While the prayers of ancient liturgies bring me inspiration and comfort, I have discovered my own mantras for attentiveness: the lines of a song I only partially recall, the words of a poem I can barely recite, the notes of a song I don’t remember learning. Each of these things engage my spirit, redirect my thoughts, focus my attention, not on the challenges of the day but on God...and for even just a few moments I give myself over to Godself...practicing being present to God wherever God and I might be.

You see, that’s the thing, isn’t it? To notice that God is with us all the time, where ever and when ever we find ourselves. You do not leave God at home when you go to work or to your doctor’s appointment. God doesn’t wait outside while you grocery shop or enjoy dinner with a friend! God doesn’t wander off while you clean your house or talk on the phone. But both the gift and the challenge is to see and experience God in *all* those things, in everything encounter of our lives.

To notice God in a beautiful sunset seems easy; it’s a bit harder to discover God in broken relationship or a frustrating day. But if we could only work at being intentional about noticing God in these places, perhaps we would open ourselves to a deeper experience of who God is and what God desires for and with us. If we could look for God in the face of the stranger who cut us off in traffic, if we could experience God in the short-tempered clerk who doesn’t help, if we could identify God in the line up of those who stole our purse, then that would go far in our being able to see and understand a God

who is all-knowing, all-loving, all-present with us and with the world. Instead of filling those moments with words—frustrated, angry, vengeful words, what if we filled our hearts with the hope that God is in there somewhere? And believing God is present somehow, some way, might our words give way to wonder, our speaking yield to listening, our shutting down transform into opening ourselves to a greater, dearer, more satisfying experience of the other, of ourselves, of God?

Practicing being in the presence of God is working at realizing that there is nothing that does not contain the potential of God! It is believing that no boundaries keep God out! It is claiming that God can be anywhere, any time, any place and we can notice that as we seek to identify God there...with us, for us, in spite of us, God is already there. The question is whether, like Samuel, we can be attentive; whether, like Samuel, we are listening; whether, like Samuel, we can hear and respond to God even when we are unsure...of ourselves, of the other, of God.

For when Samuel heard God, the news wasn't all that good! God spoke about the consequences that were to come for Eli and his household because of Eli's sons' unfaithfulness. Samuel turned out to be the bearer of bad news. But Samuel dared to be faithful to what he heard and proclaim it. And he was rewarded for this faithfulness...by both Eli and God.

I suspect that sometimes we are not present to God because we don't expect that God will be present to us. And sometimes I suspect we are not present to God because we are afraid that God *will* be present to us...and we won't like what God sees or what we'll hear! Either way, God's character of love and mercy is changeless; my attentiveness to God's presence with me whether in good times or bad results in the same compassion, the

same justice, the same loving-kindness. Such is the goodness of our God. The God who is present in all things loves and cares for us just the same.

So where do you need to practice *noticing* God in your life? Is it in a particular relationship that needs to be healed or in a particular situation where God seems silently distant? Where do you need to practice *being with* God? Is it in decision that seems beyond your control or needs that seem to go unanswered? Where do you need to practice being present *to* God? Is it in response to a nudge God is persistently giving you or a conviction God is inviting you to act on? The practice of being present to, with, for God requires just that....practice. God is *wherever* we are; our challenge is to be aware of God's presence there and receive it as a gift...a gift to guide and to strengthen, a gift to challenge and inspire, a gift to comfort and to heal, a gift to motivate and to transform.

“Here I am, for you called me,” replied Samuel. May his response be our own.