

Sermon for July 31, 2022—“Trouble Sleeping”

Eighteenth Sunday in OT, Year C—Texts: Job 33:12b-18; 1 Samuel 3:1-10,19-20—4:1

The late Gardner Taylor, known as “the dean of American preaching,” once said, from the pulpit, “I am for anything that can help a person get through the night.” How about you? Are you having trouble sleeping through the night? If so—you’re not alone. Most of the world does. Certainly—Samuel did. He tossed and turned like some preachers I know, whose sermons finally come to them in the middle of the night.

Anyone remember the old commercial for Sucrets, the sore throat lozenges? The one that shows the husband flicking on the light and saying, “Barbara? Are you up?” And his wife replies, “I am now!” Young Samuel keeps tossing and turning all night, then getting up and running to old Eli saying: “Are you up?” And all Eli can say is, “I am now! Go back to sleep, kid, you’re hearing things!”

For some people, the real problem is their dreams. We dream about all kinds of things, sometimes waking up in a cold sweat. Some of the dreams are terrifying. Some are about things you’d never dream of actually doing. Other times you’re frustrated because you can’t remember any of the details. Don’t you hate that?

So, just what was going on with Samuel that night? Could he have been dreaming about the way things could be, because religion in his time had taken a turn for the worse? After all, says the biblical writer, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days.” Maybe Samuel was the only one who could dream because “...there was no frequent vision.” You see, people had lost their way, **and** their connection with God. Some say dreams are like visions, and as such become a source of creativity, an answer to present problems and difficulties.

Apparently, such was the case for Isaac Merritt Singer, who invented the Singer sewing machine. As the story goes, his creditors had given him a couple of weeks to complete his invention, or they’d pull their financial support. So, he went to sleep that night with great anxiety, and dreamt about being out in a jungle, surrounded by cannibals. The boiling pot was ready. His hands were tied. As they came toward him with the faces of his creditors, they held up their spears ready to finish him off when he suddenly saw holes in the points of their spears, and awakened with the answer of how to complete the Singer sewing machine!

Then, of course, there are the dreamers in the Bible. Joseph might the most famous, interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams. Then there’s Jacob, Joseph’s father, with his dream of the ladder that reached all the way to heaven. There’s Ezekiel, with the dream of the dead, dry bones of Israel, spring back to life. How about Joseph, Jesus’ earthly father, warned in a dream of Herod’s plot to kill Jesus and to flee to safety in Egypt?

Sometimes our dreams can be unsettling, even frightening, as we come face to face with our shadow selves. We toss and turn in the night groping for God. Sometimes it’s a bad dream that seems all too real.

In the 1880’s, a seven-year-old boy cried himself to sleep every night, terrified of the fact that if he died, he might go to hell. His caring mother, out of patience with the religious teaching of the time, that caused her son’s nightmares tried—in vain—to comfort him.

Decades later, that little boy, Harry Emerson Fosdick, grew to become one of America's most famous preachers and theologians. No one, it seems, is exempt from tossing and turning in the middle of the night.

In our reading this morning, Samuel woke up in a cold sweat, and ran to Eli—thinking Eli had called. “Here I am, Lord,” he said, running to old Eli, who stumbled out of bed and grumbled, “Go back to sleep, kid, you’re hearing things,” which is pretty much what we always say to the dreamers, isn’t it?

“Go back to sleep Moses—you’re dreaming!”

“Go back to sleep Gandhi—you’re dreaming!”

“Go back to sleep, Dr. King—you’re dreaming!”

“Go back to sleep, Mother Teresa—you’re dreaming!”

“Go back to sleep, John Lennon—you’re a dreamer!”

He wasn’t the only one.

So—could it be that maybe the dreamers of the world really do hear God speaking to them? I wonder. There are lots of people, people of faith, famous and otherwise, who don’t. Rabbi Burt Visotsky, was featured in the Bill Moyers’ PBS discussion on Genesis. At one point says...

“You know, I’m actually surprised to be surrounded by people who so readily hear voices. I’m a praying Jew, so I talk to God all the time, but I don’t usually hear answers. It’s a much more subtle process with me. God may tell Abraham and Sarah to get up and go, and change everything about their lives.

“But nobody ever says that to me. “If I hear God at all, it’s somewhere between the lines of a page I’ve been studying for hours when I’m reading Torah, and all I ever hear is, ‘Burt, turn the page.’”

That’s pretty much the case with me. But then I think, what would I say if God did speak to me? What about you? Young Samuel, I think, has it right. He wakes and says, “Here I am, Lord!” But he didn’t know who was calling him or—for that matter—why. This is because, as the author tells us, “Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord, had not yet been revealed to him.”

But even so, especially for us, when God calls us in the middle of the night what can we know? What can we do? I think we start by recognizing that God may have something for you. That is, something he wants you to do: A thought. An action. Perhaps a course of action he’d like you to follow. Some people toss and turn, and finally cry out: “Okay—I give up! Here I am!” These are familiar words.

The Hebrew word “hineni” (pronounced hi-nen-ee”) appears 178 times, most often as a response to the call of God. It also used a parents response to the call of their child, and a child’s response to the call of a parent. The word lets us know two things: First, that the caller has the full attention of the one being called, and second, that the story will change in a dramatic way. It was explained to me in seminary that it’s kind of like a soldier when addressed by a senior officer.

Still, people use it in all sorts of ways, most commonly as a way of aggressively declaring your location to everyone, and can be used as a way of claiming the territory upon which you stand. It can be used as a way of comparing your situation to others around you, often showing yourself in a less-desirable light. Here I am driving a beat up old car when all my friends are driving brand new ones.

In his book, *A Light in the Attic*, Shel Silverstein wrote something called the “Prayer of the Selfish Child.” Listen to this...

*Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
And if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my toys to break,
So none of the other kids can use ‘em. Amen.*

Is this us?

We must face up to ourselves, and confront who we are, because until then, we’ll never really hear God calling our names, and leading us to new places, new situations and new lives. We’ll never hear God’s redeeming word of grace. Samuel didn’t hear it the first time, or the second time, or the third. Maybe he was having a hard time hearing it like so many others in his time. Eli certainly wasn’t because “the Word of the Lord was rare in the land.” Kind of seems a lot like now doesn’t it?

But I’m wondering if it isn’t simply that we’re not listening. Maybe we aren’t ready to hear what God might be saying to us, or calling us to do. Maybe we aren’t really ready for God to visit us in our dreams, peering into our innermost selves. Maybe we are hearing, but are unwilling to answer.

I mean, sure, we get ourselves ready and come to church on Sundays. We’ll do our part, maybe even acknowledge God’s presence as we worship. We’ll even pray. But heaven forbid God actually answer us, or call on us in the middle of the night. I mean—that’s crazy—isn’t it? I once saw a t-shirt that said, “Why is it that when I talk to God it’s called praying, but when God talks to me, it’s called schizophrenia?” This is not to make light of mental health issues, only to point out that—at least in our own minds—we have serious difficulty with the notion of God speaking to us. Perhaps it’s precisely because we’re not ready, let alone willing or able, to hear a word from God. Are we too comfortable? Have we told ourselves that we’re not worthy? Why is that? *Why?*

Are there places deep within us that we try to hide from God? Are there rooms in our hearts that we’ve kept locked, trying to keep God out? What’s in them? Are they filled with grief? Regret? Denial? Despair? What is it? Not that room, Lord! Any room but that one! You know that’s impossible—right? Trying to prevent God from knowing what’s in our hearts? But—that’s okay. Jesus knew what it meant to say, “Here I am.”

In the garden after the Last Supper he said in effect, “Here I am, Father, not my will, but yours be done.” Even on the cross: “My God, my God—here I am—why have you forsaken me?” But at the very end he was at one with the Father—at peace. Picture him there offering a prayer that an observant Jew would offer before dropping off to sleep: “Here I am, Lord. I am yours completely and fully. Into thy hands I commit my spirit.

Here's my question—and here, brothers and sisters, is the thing: Are we having trouble sleeping? Perhaps it's time to stop kidding ourselves, others, and—especially—God. Perhaps it's time to open ourselves up to the possibility that God is calling us, and that God can—indeed—use us. I can honestly say that I know a bit about that, and I can tell you that it was—and remains—the best thing I ever did. My only regret is that it took so long for me to do it. It's not difficult. Simple? Yes. Easy, no—but they're the first step toward wholeness and peace, a step towards being the person we've been created to be—a person that's able to make a difference, here in our church, and in our community.

“Here I am, Lord. I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.”

Are we having trouble sleeping? Perhaps you're being called to new life—to something new, something better.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.