

2 Epiphany 2020

Speak Lord for your servant is listening.

The story about Samuel and Eli always seems relevant to us. After all, who does not want God to call out to us in a similar manner? It would make life so much easier; *or not?* What we sometimes forget is that by all human understanding, Eli should have gotten the call from God, not Samuel, a young lad of 12 or 13. But Eli's sons had sinned against God and Eli had done nothing to stop them. As a result, he was not invited the conversation that night and Samuel was. Even then, Samuel finally had to be told that it was God calling him and how he must answer.

I was sure that God was calling me to the priesthood in 1970. In fact, I felt the call back in 1967 when I was 14. It was almost 30 years later when my road to the priesthood was fulfilled. It wasn't that I didn't answer the call back then, I just answered it according to **my** terms.

Joseph Sittler was an American Lutheran minister and theologian who taught at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago during the 20th Century. He tells this story about one of his students. "One student had a list of things her first call had to have: it had to be in an urban setting; it had to be with certain kinds of Chicanos, blacks, and

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poor whites; it had to be in a cultural setting where she could enjoy theater and other activities. I said, 'You know, it's as if the Bible says, "Listen, Lord, thy servant speaketh," instead of "Speak, Lord, thy servant heareth."' The church is going to dump you

someplace that may have little to do with your agenda. And it will offer the kind of challenge, humiliation, embarrassment, and opportunity that you didn't foresee."

--*Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 58.

I can tell you that the path of my calling did not happen in any way that I could have imagined at age 14. Of course, there were a lot of things that happened during those years that I could never have thought possible; both good and bad.

I have never doubted that I felt God calling out to me with the call to be a priest. I felt this so strongly in my heart. This in no way means that there have not been other times and circumstances where I felt God speaking to my heart. But I still wonder, if the path that I took was of my own doing or that of God's plan for my life. Assuming the call was a valid one and I believe that it was, I wonder if the journey was so long because of choices that I made, and that God had to work around. At 14, I had been offered an opportunity to attend a high school run by the PIME missionaries in Ohio. This would be followed by

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college and then seminary. I eventually said no. Yes, the cost would have been prohibitive for my folks to afford, but the real reason I backed out was because I liked girls. After graduating from Lumen Christi High school in Jackson I got married and went into the Navy. So, the call to priesthood became a distant memory. Was God calling me to answer the call and stay single? No way to know that now. Was my path part of God's call all along or did I manipulate the system? Did I hear God's message for me or was I listening to my own voice?

In Marjorie Kellogg's 'Tell Me that You love Me Junie Moon' ([New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1968], 176), Junie declares: "The trouble, Arthur, with you is that you seldom listen to me, and when you do, you don't hear, and when you do hear, you hear wrong, and even when you hear right, you change it so fast that it's never the same." How many of us listen to God in precisely this way?

I suspect that we all have at one time or another.

Why do we do this? Lots of reasons. Do we misunderstand the call that God is giving to us? Maybe. Are we so busy with life, that we cannot hear God? Are we scared about what God is calling us to do? Is it so outside of our comfort zones that we are paralyzed and cannot move forward? Maybe we don't want

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to move forward and answer God's call. We are comfortable where we are. It might be **God's** time, but it is not **our** time.

We all want to believe that if God calls us to do something or to go somewhere, we would answer just as Samuel did. "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening".

However, there are so many competing voices in the world around us. And many of us simply do not know how to quiet ourselves and listen for God's hushed voice.

Mothers are fond of telling their talkative children: "God gave you two ears and only one mouth, so that you would listen twice as much as talk!" We forget that as adults. Voices are everywhere! Even greeting cards speak their poetry, especially the online versions.

Nearly three centuries ago, Soren Kierkegaard said that if he were a doctor and were allowed to prescribe just one remedy for all the ills of the modern world, he would prescribe silence. “For even if the Word of God were proclaimed”, Kierkegaard said, “it would not be heard or heeded, for there is too much noise and busyness in our world”. It hasn’t gotten any better.

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Are we able to remain still long enough to recognize God’s voice? I got to tell you that this is extremely difficult for me. I am not talking about meditation, for me, just being quiet for any length of time is hard. About the only place that I have a chance of doing this is in church. And not on Sunday morning. Too much going on then. I have always felt closer to God in a quiet church, all by myself. Even then, the busyness of the world; the cellphone, the Internet; television, and social media all fight for my attention. We tell ourselves that these necessities in life are all there to accomplish God’s work. And they can be if used properly. On those occasions that we can hear God speaking, do we then have the courage to follow Her instructions? Especially if it means leaving our comfort zones. It can be scary to venture out into the unknown as we have certainly found out this past year. When things seem to be at their darkest and we are afraid, how do we move forward?

Roy L. Smith was a minister in the Methodist Church in the early 20th century. A story that he told in one of his sermon’s was a story of his fear of the dark when he was a boy. Late one evening, his father asked him to go to the barn for some tools. Roy begged his father not to send him, admitting he was deathly afraid of the dark. His father put a

lantern into his hand. "How far can you see, son?" "As far as the mulberry tree," he replied. "Then go to the

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mulberry tree." When the boy arrived there, his father asked, "Now, how far can you see?" "I can see to the currant bush," said the boy. When the boy arrived at the currant bush, his father asked again: "How far can you see from there?" This time it was the henhouse. Next it was the hayloft, and finally the barn. And so, the boy, step by step, made it to the barn.

My sisters and brothers; The Light makes all the difference. He guides our journey.

In these times, we need to listen for God's voice amongst the commotion and craziness that surrounds us. God's Voice must prevail. We must listen. We must pray for enough holy silence in our lives to overcome everything else.

I wish it were different, but God is not likely to call our names loud enough at night to wake us out of our sleep. Could happen...but probably not. We are going to have to find ways to be silent and to listen for His voice. Then even if we are called to travel an uncharted road, and everything around us screams for us to turn around and go back, we can go out a few steps at a time with the light of Christ showing us the way. There is no doubt that the world seems to be in chaos right now. Maybe, it is because to those of us who are trying to follow God's plan for our lives, all else **does** appear to be chaos. The bottom

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line is that we cannot show others how to walk in the light of Christ unless we are already there holding the lamp. No one said it was easy, but like Samuel, first we need to hear the voice of God, and then listen.

Let us Pray.

Perfect Light of revelation,

as you shone in the life of Jesus,

whose epiphany we celebrate,

so shine in us and through us,

that we may become beacons of truth and compassion,

enlightening all creation

with deeds of justice and mercy. Amen.