

“Nighttime Conversations”

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1 Samuel 3:10

Samuel will one day be an important figure in the life of Israel, but for now he is a child, living at the Temple with his mentor Eli the priest. One night, God calls to Samuel. The boy does not realize what is happening until finally he approaches Eli who explains how he should respond.

Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

John 3:1-2

A religious leader from among the Jewish people, approaches Jesus in another nighttime encounter.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

A Brief Chancel Drama for Lent

- Adult: I don't know. I don't understand. What is it about this Jesus? Is he a prophet? Does he speak for God?
- Youth: I can't sleep. Every time I start to get comfortable, it sounds like someone's calling me, “Samuel. Samuel.” But when I look up, I don't see anybody. I'm tired and Eli's going to be angry with me if I'm grumpy tomorrow.
- Adult: I am a leader among the people. They look up to me. I have studied scripture and I know all about God. People look to me for answers. I thought I had answers. But this Jesus makes me question everything I thought I knew. Who is he?
- Youth: I don't want to get out of bed. I don't want to ask Eli what's happening. He'll think I'm being silly. And besides, there might be things in the dark that I can't see. The shadows scare me when they move. ... But that voice won't let me sleep.
- Adult: Someone might notice if I go to talk with him. People might talk: “Nicodemus went to see Jesus. Guess he's not so sure after all.” But I *don't* know. Or at least I'm not certain. Is this really all there is or is there more than what I've been taught? What am I missing? Am I at least on the right track?
- Youth: Master... Eli...
I keep hearing this voice calling my name. It keeps saying, “Samuel. Samuel.” I don't know what to do. There's nobody there. Is it you? Is it in my head? Please tell me what to do...
- Adult: I have the best portfolio of any Pharisees. But these questions won't let me rest. I'll take some refreshments. Then I'll go to where Jesus is staying and act like it's just a polite evening visit.
(*Knocks on door.*) I don't know what I'm doing here. This is so silly...
- Three / Four: Nicodemus! / Samuel!
- Adult / Youth: Yes, I'm here!

Nicodemus has everything. An excellent education. Job security. As a Pharisee, he is revered by the people. As a member of the Sanhedrin, he's respected among his peers. No doubt, he has fine clothes and a comfortable home. Best seat at synagogue. He is also the honored guest at any dinner party he attends.

Nicodemus has a good reputation, so good that it creates a dilemma within him. He has questions and he wants to talk to Jesus about them. But how? Everyone in Jerusalem knows him. What will they think if they discover that he visited a troublemaker who just the day before had driven from

the Temple those who exchange foreign coins and sell Temple offerings, shouting, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

Yes, Nicodemus has everything, including a problem.

Samuel has virtually nothing. He was promised to God before he was born. By his fourth birthday, the Temple in Shiloh was his home. His mother would drop off a new robe for him every year when the family made their annual pilgrimage, but old Eli the priest is probably the only family he knows. No doubt he eats well enough and he has been growing well, both in physical stature and as someone who will one day speak for God. But right now, he is a nobody.

When he hears a voice calling him in the night, he assumes it’s Eli. But tired old Eli sends him back to bed until finally on the third time, he puts the pieces together and instructs Samuel on how to respond the next time. (Because with God, there is always a next time!)

Samuel has nothing, for now. He faces his nighttime conflict differently than Nicodemus does but they both have a problem. How does one respond when God turns the world upside-down?

We might think of *night* as a metaphor for *down-time*. “Night is a time when we cannot see. Night is when we cannot control. Night is when children are frightened because the shadows seem lively. Night is when things are unclear and beyond explanation. Night is when... we have bright lights all around the house to fend off the darkness. Night is when even adults are out of control, and we are visited by our haunted past and our feared future, and we dream and have nightmares. ...”ⁱ

Nighttime is bewildering. The Pharisee is confronted by questions. The youth is confused. His mentor is slow to figure out what is going on. In each case, something out of the ordinary is happening. Anthropologists call this *liminality*. Liminality comes from the Latin word meaning “threshold.” Have you ever been somewhere and felt like the space between the here & now and the holy is so thin that you could almost poke your finger through, could almost catch a glimpse of the divine? Liminality is like that. It describe the unsettling feeling we notice at the edge of something new, when life is taking on a new shape.

Though they do not realize it, Samuel, Nicodemus and even Eli are at thresholds. Each of their lives will soon be moving in new directions.

When Nicodemus visits, Jesus knows that he did not come out of idle curiosity – this is no social call – so he concentrates his attention on Nicodemus’ feeling of insufficiency. “You’ve got to start over! You’ve got to be reborn. ... You’ve got to become as vulnerable and innocent and dependent as a child.”ⁱⁱ

Nicodemus and Samuel have more in common than we thought. Samuel is dependent and vulnerable. Nicodemus is called to become so. And, so are we. “You’ve got to forego your social position, your achievements, your wealth, your reputation. You’ve got to let go of all the things that make you self-sufficient and that alienate you from the wonder of the gift of God. *Start over in vulnerability, in innocence, and in dependence, for the way you are living now keeps you cut off... from all the gifts of life for which you so much yearn.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

Too often we talk about Jesus’ compassion while forgetting that he never avoids speaking a hard truth. With Jesus, with God, we will never get one without the other. It is always truth delivered in love.

What questions have been gnawing on your mind? Our Lenten reminder is to go, seek. Pursue what God would have you know. It might not be easy answers, but God is ready and waiting.

When their meetings are over, God has flipped the world on end for both Nicodemus and young Samuel. They have each had a holy encounter. Jesus’ words continue to ring in Nicodemus’ mind: God so loved the world that God gave his only son so that everyone who believes may have eternal life (John 3:16).

This too is an invitation to become vulnerable, dependent. Once all Nicodemus thought he knew has been blown away, there is room for whatever breeze God as Spirit might send his way. The change does not happen instantly, but Nicodemus is changed. When the time comes, it is he who reminds the rest of the Sanhedrin that Jesus is entitled to a fair hearing. And it is he who joins Joseph of Arimathea in bringing spices to anoint Jesus’ body.

Samuel too is changed. He does not want to tell Eli what he learns – it is bad news for the old man – yet Eli guides the youngster well. And as time passed, Samuel becomes a leader to all Israel.

Too often, people think the church is a place for unequivocal answers. Ambiguity leaves us uncomfortable. With certainty, we can relax. But, and this is one of those uncomfortable truths, God does not want us to be relaxed, not for long. The Spirit can do nothing with our certainties. Only in ambiguity, only when we step away from the familiar can something new emerge.

Someone observed last Sunday that I referenced “the season of Lent” many times. Today, I said it only once, until now. Lent is an invitation to ask with Nicodemus, “How can this be?” and to say with Samuel, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” It is an invitation to let ourselves be born anew.

May it be so.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *A Way Other Than Our Own: Devotions for Lent*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2017, 24.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 34-5.