

“Here I Am” / I Samuel 3:1-10 / 18 January 2015

Old Eli the High Priest, with his dim eyesight, nodding off to sleep in the holy place while the lamp of the temple sputters and burns low! Oh, Eli the High Priest, I've known him all my life. You have, too. We've come across him in positions of authority and trust. We've seen him plugging away blankly at some task that ought to be done with passion. He's worn out, going through the motions, just hanging on until he can retire, tired, uninspired, uninspiring, unwilling to lead or step down! We've seen Eli in more posts of power than we can count. His bored and sleepy glance is enough to drain all the enthusiasm out of our spirits. He's held elected office in our state and in our nation; he's stood at the helm of institutions and churches that ought to be out there changing the world; he's been a hanger-on in corporations and non-profits alike since—well—since the Prophet Samuel was a pup. Eli's weary old spirit is not new to us, for we've witnessed its deadening effect in places where we thought we would find joy and encouragement. Worst of all, we've occasionally felt Eli's deadening spirit settle like a pall over our own once-eager hearts. Eli, you're not a bad guy. Just take your own advice and listen!

Through an unspeakably dorky series of Internet searches, I recently became aware of the story of one Rev. Frederick Densham, who was the vicar of the little moss-covered church in the village of Warleggan, in England. The Reverend Densham showed up at Warleggan in 1931, after years as a missionary in India, and he immediately set about the task of alienating his congregation so badly that they all stopped coming to church. All of them! He preached firebrand sermons about “the hellward follies” of reading novels, going to the cinema, dancing, drinking, and eating meat—for Densham's time in India had made him a vegetarian. At his first meeting of the vestry (which is similar to our session) a church member offered him a fresh leg of lamb, but he turned down the gift with scorn and mockery, humiliating the giver in the process. Densham closed down the Sunday school, declaring that the teachers were all heretics. And he tried to win back the youngsters of the village by showing them slides of famous paintings that depicted events from Greek and Roman mythology—like Saturn devouring his son and the beheading of Medusa. Children were horrified, and parents were infuriated.

He was a lonely fellow, and so he bought himself a whole litter of German shepherd pups that soon began to have run of the churchyard and the village. The dogs even took to marauding his parishioners' sheep. All the people of Warleggan lived in fear of the vicar's dog pack, which was led by a top dog and chief aggressor ironically named Gandhi, after the peace-loving hero of Densham's India days. In a last ditch effort to attract people back to his dwindling congregation, the vicar spent an entire night painting the inside of the grand medieval church in bright primary colors: yellow, red, and blue.

That was the last straw. Just two years into his pastorate at the little church in Warleggan, all of the parishioners stopped attending services—every last one of them. And the vicar just stopped trying. The next two decades, from 1933 until 1953, were a period of nearly perfect silence in Densham's life, as he continued to hold services each week, preaching to an empty church—for twenty years! As the old vicar grew lonelier and a little paranoid, he had an eight-foot high barbed wire fence erected around the church rectory, where he lived. And although not a soul attended any of the church services, ever, not even on Christmas, he continued to preach each and every week so that no one could accuse him of neglecting his duties. Each Sunday he made a note in the parish record book, describing the weather and the attendance. The entries always ended with “No congregation.” When the weather was good, he always wrote, “No wind, no rain, no snow, no congregation.” In time, Densham took to making life-sized cardboard figures that he sat in the pews, just to give himself the illusion that he was preaching to a full

house. His eccentricity became so famous that the English writer Daphne du Maurier made mention of him in one of her books. And just one week before his lonely death in 1953, *Life Magazine* sent a reporter from New York to cover this strange and sad tale of the eccentric English parson who preached and sang each week to an empty church.

Finally, at the age of 83, the vicar died while climbing the stairs to go to bed. So isolated was he from his people that he wasn't discovered until two days later. In 2014, the celebrated actor Edward Woodward's final performance was to play the Reverend Densham in the film, *A Congregation of Ghosts*, a failed movie about Densham's sad life. Not surprisingly, the film went straight to DVD. One critic called *A Congregation of Ghosts* "a collection of flaws." But it was beautifully filmed on location on the eerie Bodmin Moor and in the dark old church at Warleggan.

Now, I'm not a believer in ghosts, but many people in Warleggan claim that they still see the parson wandering through fields and pastures in his black cloak and stovepipe hat. No, I don't believe in ghosts, for I cannot believe that God is so sloppy as to lose a soul and let him or her wander the earth—even in "just about the spookiest place on the planet." And yet, wasn't poor old Rev. Densham just a less powerful, twentieth century version of the old High Priest, Eli—except without a bright young Samuel coming to the rescue? Hanging on for twenty years and going through the motions joylessly until the day when he can just collapse and have done with it. I cannot believe in ghosts—for one thing my house is too old and creaky to allow me any peace if I did. But I do believe that I see weary old Eli running loose in our world, and not just the church! Wherever the vision has failed, where the lamp of faith burns low, where people just hang on and go through the motions of once-meaningful relationships, the spirit of old Eli seems to be at the helm. That broken down spirit of tiredness and joylessness, a dull, rote passionless spirit sometimes haunts us all—young and old alike. Where's the joy in our work? Where's the joy in our relationships? Where's the joy in our daily living?

Oh, the joy! It gets lost somewhere along the way, doesn't it? It evaporates and leaves us dancing around the ashes of a long-cold fire. It's not that we ever consciously dismiss the joy from our lives, our jobs, our homes. It's not that we ever tell our joy to take a hike. But it disappears if we don't hold it aright, and fades away someplace in the great distance between the two very different postures for living that we find in today's reading from the Book of First Samuel. One dull posture for living says, "Here I am." And the other active posture says, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Do you ever feel like you're asleep on the job, or preaching to an empty church? Do you ever feel like you're just showing up in life—your relationships, your holiday gatherings, your job, your faith—just showing up and doing what's expected of you, going through the motions, but not really feeling any of it? We need to learn the difference between the passive posture for living that merely says, "Here I am," and the active posture for living that says, "I'm listening. I'm listening." Just be still sometimes and listen.

This story from First Samuel is a Sunday school teacher's dream. It's dramatic and suspenseful; it has a pleasing narrative arc, and it's brief—which is always good with the under-ten crowd. Most importantly, it's one of only a handful of Bible stories where the main character is a child. As literature, this is pretty good stuff. Back in 2006, the editors of *The Week Magazine* named First and Second Samuel among the top 100 best books of all time. These are Bible stories with complex characters, and mixed motives, and poetic, concrete imagery. Consider the way the writer sets up the scene: It's late at night; the temple is dark; the lamp above the altar—which ought to burn all the time—is growing dim. A sleeping, half blind old

priest named Eli is in charge, but he's stopped taking calls from God a long time ago. In the previous chapters, we learn that old Eli has his hands full with his two ne'er-do-well adult sons. They're supposed to be stepping up soon to let Eli retire, but the old priest knows they're buffoons, and so he just keeps on keeping on—despite the fact that he long ago outlived his zeal, his vision.

God steals up on a servant boy named Samuel, wakens him in the night, and whispers God's words to him. The story begins by saying: "The Word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision." Did you notice all the nice little literary flourishes that the writer of First Samuel uses to illustrate the point? Eli, the high priest, is sleepy and blind. The lamp at the altar is sputtering. The story takes place in the dark of night, when everyone is asleep. The imagery is dramatic: darkness, diminishing light, lack of vision. And all of it in the temple of the Lord, a place that's supposed to be lively and bright. The images come together to tell a tale: faith was in decline. People didn't trust their leaders. The church was a dark place where there was no vision. The Word of the Lord was rare. And into this scene of failed faith, empty religion, the Spirit comes whispering, whispering in the night. Three times, the child Samuel responds with the inept answer that echoes throughout the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures: "Here I am," until old Eli, in his faded wisdom teaches young Samuel the appropriate response to give whenever the Spirit comes to call. No, it's not a passive, "Here I am." It's an active, "Speak. Speak, for I'm listening."

Sometimes, when our own vision grows dim, the wisest and the most loving thing we can do is to let others take the lead. I don't say this to be disrespectful or unkind, but I truthfully believe that the best thing Pope Benedict ever did was to resign. It was a wise and a just decision, and it cannot have been easy for him. He should be commended for having had the wisdom to realize that he was standing in the way of progress. And it wasn't because he was in his eighties. We've all known many elderly folks who were more forward-thinking than their younger counterparts. No, he was just not the right man to lead the Roman Church into the future, and he had the courage to let go. Ah, letting go does take courage! Old Eli and even the Reverend Densham didn't have the courage or the wisdom to let go when their time was up. They clung, and grasped, and hung on and brought a huge emotional and spiritual drain onto their whole system. They said, as the boy Samuel did at first, "Here I am. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere. Yes-siree. I'm right here where I've been. You want me, you know where to find me...right...here." Oh, we get so stuck. No matter our age, we get stuck, and, well, "Here we are."

Ah, but listening! Listening is what Samuel finally learns that he must do, and listening is the key to staying fresh in life. They say that 90% of success in life is just showing up. It's not. 90% of success in life is showing up...and listening! The other 10%, well, if you figure that out, then I'll be all ears. But don't tell me on a Sunday morning because I'm too preoccupied to hear anything then. Listening is the key to keeping the joy from passing between your fingers like sand! In his comical science fiction series, the writer Douglas Adams describes an incident where the main character is locked up in an alien spaceship and about to die. The character declares, "You know, it's at times like this when I'm trapped in a Vogon airlock with a man from Betelgeuse and about to die of asphyxiation in deep space that I really wish I'd listened to what my mother told me when I was young!" The man from Betelgeuse asks, "Why, what did she tell you?" The answer comes, "I don't know, I didn't listen!" Listening is what Eli has long since stopped doing, and that's why the Spirit has to waken little Samuel in the night, for he's the only one left with ears to hear. Too bad Eli wasn't listening, for the Spirit's message to Samuel is

about Eli. It's a clear case of divine triangulating.

Now, I must admit that I'm a little uncomfortable with all this talk about God waking people in the night and giving them messages. I've known a few too many folks who really do believe that God speaks directly to them and that their job is to convey the message to others. In college, a girl once said to me that God was telling her to marry me. Not only was she wrong, but she put a swift end to what little friendship she and I once enjoyed. And yet, you cannot deny the power of listening, really listening. It's very rare indeed to find someone who will really listen. If you have ever felt truly heard by someone in your life—deeply, meaningfully heard with undivided attention—then you have never forgotten that person. If you ever listen with real attention to another person, looking beneath his or her spoken words to the experiences and the emotions that produce those words, then I promise you that that person counts you as one of his or her heroes. How seldom we listen even to those we love. Most of the time, we're so busy with our own troubles that we hear only what we expect or want them to say. What might we hear if we put all other tasks aside and heard what they were really trying to tell us? Listening opens the door to genuine relationships. It kindles joy anew.

There are two postures for living. One passively declares, "Here I am, doing what I'm supposed to be doing as a spouse, parent, friend, a person of faith, a church member." The other says, "Speak to me; I'm listening." What if Eli had listened to the Spirit? What if Densham had listened to his congregation? What if you and I would listen to the rhythm of our own days and lives, for surely God's Spirit whispers in and through them? Oh, that we would truly listen to those we love and to those we don't! How might our world be if we actually listened to our enemies instead of vilifying them and refusing to negotiate? What if we listened? Just be still sometimes. Be still and listen. Be still and listen. Instead of murmuring, "Here I am," let our response always be, "Speak to me; I am listening." Amen.