

Sermon, 1/17/2021, St. David's, 1 Samuel 3:1-20; John 1:43-51 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

Last Sunday, on the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, I spoke to you about how I had read that darkness can be generative in Genesis.<sup>1</sup> We saw this in last week's Old Testament reading, where God created beautiful things out of the darkness. A different author in the same commentary took this even further this week, writing about darkness in today's Old Testament story of Samuel, making a case for darkness as a place where holiness happens.<sup>2</sup>

The story begins in darkness. Eli was in his room, and we heard that his eyesight had begun to grow dim, which means he spent not just his nights but also his days in darkness. In the temple that night, where the young Samuel slept, the lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out.

Imagine sleeping in a temple with a flickering lamp. I wonder what sorts of sounds were routine. In my house, lying in bed, I can hear the air cleaner. I hear an occasional car, maybe a dog or a cat. My favorite animal to hear at night is an owl. Once in a while, Pepper will bark in the middle of the night, so I go downstairs to see what's getting her stirred up.

What do you think Samuel heard as he lay in the temple in the dark? Animals outside? I bet it was eerily quiet inside. I bet the temple smelled of olive oil from the lamp that had not yet gone out.

Samuel was a child, so he probably fell asleep fast and slept hard. But then Samuel thought he heard Eli calling him three times and went to see what Eli wanted. But it wasn't Eli calling him. It took Eli a while to figure out what was going on, and to tell the boy what to do.

One of the hymns that Bonnie selected today is "I the Lord of Sea and Sky," which comes from *Wonder, Love and Praise*, a supplement to our hymnal. I hate that we don't get to sing this hymn today because of the pandemic. The chorus includes, "Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night."

There's something holy about the night. Something holy about darkness.

I'm always tempted to end the reading with "Speak, for your servant is listening." Our weekly cycle of readings allows us to end there: the next part is optional. But if we end with "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening," we miss something. We would end on an excited note. Samuel and Eli have worked through something in the dark, holy night, and now Samuel awaits the word of the Lord eagerly.

That would be a nice place to end, because when the word of the Lord comes, it is about punishment. Imagine Samuel in the temple after the Lord finished speaking, dreading the morning light, when he would have to confront Eli. When morning came, Samuel opened the doors of the temple. The feeling of holiness and excitement, I imagine, would have run out like

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<sup>1</sup> Hooker, Paul, "Genesis 1:1-5 Commentary 1" in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020, p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, Tamara, "1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20) Commentary 2" in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020, p.186.

the oil in the lamp of the Lord. Now Samuel had to face Eli, his beloved mentor, a faithful priest who was about to be punished.

Sometimes we hear that everything looks better in the morning. Sometimes it's true. Sometimes the sunrise reveals that something we were afraid of in the dark isn't actually scary; but other times the light shows that what seemed like magic in the dark now looks dull and tarnished.

Eli's eyes may have been dim but he was the one who perceived that the Lord was trying to speak to Samuel. Sometimes we can see or at least perceive better in darkness. I remember being a girl at slumber parties. My favorite part was always after whoever's parents—sometimes mine—made us turn out the lights and get in our sleeping bags, because then we would whisper in the dark. Sometimes we can say things to people when we aren't looking at their face that we wouldn't dare confess otherwise.

Think about how in winter we have more darkness, but the leaves off the trees let us see things that had been hidden, like birds and squirrels and nests.

Our Gospel reading talks a lot about seeing. Philip invites Nathanael to "come and see."

Nathanael had just said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" What's your Nazareth? What are you suspicious of? Can anything good come out of a Democrat? Can anything good come out of a Republican? Can anything good come out of New England or the Midwest or the South? I remember a salsa commercial from years ago, with cowboys who were horrified to learn that someone was trying to make them eat salsa made in *New York City*. I resonate with that commercial and am suspicious of Mexican outside of the Southwest.

What are you suspicious of? What are some places or ideologies or people that immediately trigger your defenses or make you dismissive? Someone younger or older than I can't possibly tell me anything about that. Someone with those wrong beliefs should stay away from me.

Do you think Jesus has anything to show us about that? Do you think Jesus knows the stuff we detest or dismiss?

Nathanael, despite his skepticism, accepted the invitation to come and see. Jesus then told Nathanael that he had seen him under the fig tree, which impressed Nathanael. He felt seen. He was startled that Jesus knew this about him without being told. Then Jesus told Philip and Nathanael that they would see greater things than these. They would see heaven open and angels ascending and descending.

Angels ascending and descending recalls the ladder that Jacob saw in his dream, that dream he had in the dark. Again, the dark was a place where he had a vision, like Samuel. Sometimes we can see or perceive better in the dark. Sometimes the darkness is a place of deep holiness.

In this season of Epiphany, we look for signs in the darkness, like the star that guided the wise ones to the Christ child. Think of them traveling at night, in the dark. Like driving to the airport in the wee hours before the sun has come up, filled with anticipation. In this season of Epiphany, we listen for the voice of God like Samuel heard, like Phillip and Nathaniel heard.

In this season of signs and wonders, we are called to cultivate that feeling. Of Samuel, lying in the temple, trembling with excitement, waiting for the word of the Lord. Like Nathanael, skeptical, but willing to come and see. What wonderful, holy things are waiting for you to find them in this dark season?