

“Attentive Living”

“Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’”

There is so much going on in that verse. Let’s begin with Eli ...

Eli perceives . . . He has spiritual insight into something that the Lord is doing. What’s the big deal about that? Eli was, after all, the High Priest of all Judea — shouldn’t he have spiritual insight? Well, yes, he should. Except . . . Eli was a mess.

Already at this point the situation in his family has deteriorated to the point where his sons are just absolute rotters — probably diagnosable, but precisely what that diagnosis would be I’m not sure. Eli is almost blind, partially deaf, and most definitely on his way out as High Priest. He doesn’t know it, but this boy Samuel, whom he has taken in as a kind of charitable “project,” is going to be his replacement.

Eli is a mess — physically, career-wise, and most definitely spiritually; and God uses him to provide spiritual insight. Lesson to learn: Do not ever presume to know what God can and cannot do in someone’s life — including, and maybe especially, your own. This “mess” counsels Samuel because he perceives that the voice of God is calling Samuel.

Now, in our universe, where things are always done right, in sequence, and with great logic, it would have been the boy-wonder Samuel giving the messed-up old has-been Eli counsel. But God’s order is not our order — thank God.

Next, there is the counsel given because of the perception gained: Let’s break it down a bit.

“Go, lie down . . .” There are a couple of ways to read that. It could be read: *“Go back into your regular routine, and let God come to you there.”* There’s a lot — a lot! — to be said for listening for the voice of

God in the midst of the daily, the commonplace, the routine. We miss so much of what God wants to give us because we get so caught up in the daily grind. We rush from pillar to post throughout the day — living up to (or at least trying) to everyone’s expectations — my spouse, the kids, my boss, my co-workers, my friends, my neighbors, people here at church, my Pastor, my parents, the government . . . all of whom seem to be insisting that what I give is never enough, never good enough, never quite right. We stumble home exhausted at the end of the day, only to find that there is no respite there. And the day ends as we collapse into bed . . . and throughout that whole time, we have not heard word one from God. Of course, we may not want to hear that voice, because on top of the spouse, kids, parents, boss, co-workers, neighbors friends, church people, Pastor, government and all the rest, why would I want God to add to the my list of “Things to Do”?

But maybe what Eli perceived when he said, “***Go lie down,***” was this: “*Go into a quiet place where you can cut off all distractions and let God speak to you.*” Uh, Pastor? . . . Can you pay attention here? Did you forget about that long list of people looking for my time and energy? Where in the world am I going to find time to go to a quiet place and spend some time listening for God? Oh, and don’t you dare lay that Luther quote (if it was indeed Luther who said it and not Wesley, or Calvin, or Ranger Rick) “*Lord, I have so much to do today, I cannot possibly get it all done unless I spend at least two or three hours with You in prayer.*” — Would you please get real?

“***Go. lie down . . .***” I like the sound of that. What must that be like? Actually, whether you take that counsel to mean meet God in the daily routines or meet God in a special place and time, the point is that you be listening for the voice of God. Shut off the TV . . . turn down the car radio, CD, Ipod . . . close the door (if you can) . . . and just listen. Your brain is a remarkable thing . . . and God can speak to you there, if you but listen.

“***. . . and if he calls you . . .***” You may say, “*But I don’t hear Him.*”

Okay. Maybe right at the moment God is not speaking a specific message just for you. I think God is always speaking the message of His love, grace and forgiveness and that this message is all around us for our ears, our eyes, our lips, our mouths, our hands and feet to take in. But, it may be that at any given moment, God does not have a specific message for you.

But maybe He has one for someone else. Would you in silence right now ask God to make known to you one person in our worship right now that He wants to bless? Now, as you sit there in quiet, asking God silently to reveal to you some blessing He would want to speak to that person. Listen for something specific: Not a wimpy blessing, but a definite bona fide word from God to that person. Then, as the Lord leads you, get in touch with that person and speak the blessing God has given you. I know that, since we are in different spaces, some in the sanctuary, some in cars, some at home watching on Facebook, some of you would resist this . . . some of you would be fearful about trying it . . . some would venture forth and give it shot and be disappointed and then discouraged . . . and a few of you would hear from God and be bold enough in Christ to do the unthinkable and actually make that move. This is like your first time on a bicycle, wobbly at first, maybe a scraped elbow or knee, but over time you get the hang of it and find the joy.

I wonder, though, did I leave out something as I asked you to do this? Eli told Samuel: “. . . *you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’*” I don’t want to get into some idea that Eli was providing a magic formula here, or that this is some kind of incantation by which we can summon God. But there is something in these words that suggest power. “*Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.*” I couldn’t at first put my finger on, and that I realized — it’s the power of humility, the power of submission. Eli was not telling Samuel to gain control, but to let go of control. Paying attention to God means releasing our need to be in control. The instruction that Samuel got was not just to say, “*Speak, Lord!*” and then throw God an existential dog biscuit with a “*Good boy!*” The emphasis is two-fold. Yes, “*Speak, Lord.*” but also, “*I need to be*

ready to listen. Make me ready to listen.”

This is attentive living. Listening for the voice, the Word from God. It is why Phillip and Nathanael wound up following Jesus. There’s a lot going on in that text, as well.

I don’t know what to make of John’s information that Phillip **“was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.”** It might be there to set us up to understand Nathanael’s bias against anything from Nazareth — sort of like some people in Ohio who can bring themselves to speak only of *“that state up north.”*

More interesting is how John uses the word “found” here — **“*Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’*”** It is a play on the same Greek word, *ἐυρισκο*, *heurisko* but it has here a double edge. Phillip went looking for Nathanael; Jesus had come to him and said, **“Follow me.”** So, in a very real sense, Jesus had found Phillip. Yet Phillip’s witness is, **“We have found the one . . .”**

Did you ever find this to be true in your life, that, when you least expect something, there it is? Did you hear how I used the word “find” there? “Discover, realize,” or as my Grandpa used to say, *“Comes me a light on.”* Now, how did Phillip find that to be true? By attentive living. Hold on, Pastor. Neither Phillip nor Nathanael were anticipating Jesus. I’m not so sure . . . Phillip does identify Jesus as “the one” which would suggest a very specific sense of identity. My point is that, when Jesus did show up, they were drawn into Him because that were ready (or better yet, readied) for “the One” to come.

Let me give you an illustration, which speaks both to the surprising grace of God and where it can touch lives. Several years ago, as I was involved in a Formational Prayer Seminar, in the very first small-group session, I had six men (I usually wind up with all-male groups). One man (I’ll call him “A”) let it be known right away that he was upset that he had been slotted to be in my group, since he knew one of the other small-group

leaders and had expected to be in her group. So he announced that he wasn't going to share what I had asked each participant to share (name, where from, why they came, what they hoped to receive) — actually that was okay, since a cardinal rule of all small group work is that each person may opt out, they just have to explain why. So the other men shared that information, and I led them to an exercise involving getting to what is called a “safe place.” After all of them had been through that exercise, I asked them to tell something about their “safe place” and, as the man sitting two seats away from “A” (I’ll call him “C”) described his place and gave it a name, “A” took in a deep, audible gasp. He said to the group, *“I guess I do belong in this group.”* It turned out that the place “C” had gone to as a “safe place,” was the very site where “A” had been sexually abused as a child.

Now here’s my point. While “A” was highly resistant, even belligerent, at the very first, when he heard what he knew to be a word from God, he was on it. He paid attention. He could have said, *“Now isn’t that a curious coincidence?”* No . . . he gave it due heed.

Where is God finding you today . . . this week . . . at this moment, this season, in your life? Where is He surprising you as He shows up and touches you in some way? Where is His grace catching you in such a way that you want to either run to Him or run to someone else to let them know what happened? Or is the grace of God, the presence of Christ, just a concept . . . an idea that doesn’t really touch you at any profound level? If that is what grace means to you — something you know to be true but not exactly real — then maybe you need to give a little more attention to God as He comes.

In today’s Second Lesson, St. Paul encourages us to **“glorify God in your body.”** Paul is specifically addressing a grave concern about how some people in Corinth saw no problem with engaging in what had been their old way of life, caught up in pagan prostitution rituals. That all goes to an issue of being bound to spiritual strongholds that can gain control over your life and cut you off from God.

So Paul has to step in and say, *“Pay attention to this! Your life is now bound up in Christ. How can you give that life over to a temple prostitute and think that this will somehow not have a lasting impact?”* At which point we can all breathe a collective sigh of relief because, thank God, there are no temples practicing prostitution around here. Although, I’m not so sure about that . . .

Nonetheless, here is the issue for us: What is there in life — your life, the life of the community or communities in which you live and move — that has the potential to rob you of full participation with Christ? What do you give yourself to that draws you away from Christ? Some of it may be hidden from even you . . . some of it you know all too well . . . but we all develop ways of living that meet what we think we need. Whatever it is . . . overconsumption of M&M’s, Oprah idolatry, binge drinking, you name it . . . it just doesn’t work. Oh, it may bring a level of satisfaction, but truth be told, we know we are limping when we should be running, crawling where we need to skip, and stuck in the ground when it’s time to dance.

“Glorify God in your body . . .” — some have turned that into a law to shame people for overeating, or not exercising, or being too sedentary, or being too concerned about appearance. This is not to be a burden. This is an invitation to pay attention to what can cause you to be drawn away from God and Christ. Be attentive, there are forces at work that seek to do you harm.

In the end, this issue of attentive living comes to this: What are you doing that is strengthening and tightening your connection to God. Or to say it another, and maybe better way: What is God doing in you that is drawing you in closer to Him? Are you listening to Him? Are you hearing from Him? Are you experiencing anything like growth, insight, joy from what you are coming to know? Are you paying attention in ways that God can use to bring you closer to Him?

To be sure, God can smack you upside the head and gain your attention. He may do just that if the need arises.

Some of you have told me of times when you just knew that what was going on in your life was something God had been working there. Say “Yes!” to that! Take the time to turn away from the grind, the hustle, the whirlwinds that often become our daily lives and invest some of that energy just to sit in God’s presence and listen.

Pay attention . . . and you will hear God’s calling — and healing — voice.

Amen.