

## 39th General Council: Speak, for Your Servant Is Listening

A sermon given by Keith Howard of Emerging Spirit, at discernment at General Council 39, Monday, August 14, 2006. Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20).

Just after Easter this year, the polling firm Ipsos Reid asked Canadians if they had ever experienced God. Forty-two percent of Canadians testify to the feeling that they were in the presence of God. Forty-two percent!

During the last two years, Emerging Spirit, the project with which I am involved, hired the Environics research firm to gauge interest in a church like ours. They tell us that “of those between the ages of 30/45 not affiliated with any other faith group, like Judaism or Islam, 77% indicate a strong or moderate interest in some involvement with a church like The United Church of Canada.” Seventy-seven percent. Reg Bibby, in independent research with slightly different criteria, reports 62 percent.

Could something be going on out there? Could something be up? Are other voices speaking than those we are accustomed to hearing? Could it be that God is on the loose and whispering to others? And even more radically, could it be that God seeks to address us through “the others”?

Our story in Samuel involves a young person and Eli. Eli was the supreme representative of the dominant religious organization of his day.

The story begins with some sobering words: “At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room.” Eli, the prime public face of organized religion, is losing the ability to see. He seems plagued by weariness. And when we are familiar with the events up to this story, it is no wonder he is weary in the soul.

But then hope flickers. Or, as the story says, “the lamp of God had not yet gone out.”

Samuel, lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was, hears “Samuel! Samuel!”

Samuel springs up and runs to the representative of the religious establishment of the day thinking that surely the voice came from there, because do not they have the franchise on hearing the voice of God? Are they not the ones who knows the twists, turns, and puzzles of the Bible?

People ask about the Da Vinci Code because they assume that if anyone knows about Jesus it would be those church people. If anyone hears from God on a regular basis, would it not be those people who are always using the divine name?

Eli says, “Wasn’t me. Go back to your sleeping.”

Yet again the voice stirs the one who lives in another room. By now, for those familiar with biblical patterns, a suspicion begins to form. Perhaps this persistence may be a clue of something else afoot? Yet again, the younger one stirs, certain that a voice, a call has been directed his way. And again, the path leads to the religious establishment.

We do not have the entire conversation. Perhaps Eli was grumpy: “What’s the matter with you? Can’t you see I’m tired, that I’m burdened with family matters? I’ll get to you in the morning when things look better. Besides, what makes you think a call might be coming to you, you who do not even know enough yet to know what you don’t know, you with your

confused and sloppy understanding of spirituality and smorgasbord of a moral code?" All we have is the condensed version, albeit with a slightly more compassionate tone: "I did not call, my son; lie down again."

And then again, a third time, even though "Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." Even though Samuel was unschooled and non-credentialed by the Interview Board, God speaks.

Now the story moves to an entirely different level and takes an unexpected turn.

Eli, the representative of the dominant religious institution according to the census, Eli shows spiritual discernment, humility, and courage.

Again we do not have the Record of Proceedings, the dialogues in the hallways, the accounting of the number of Diet Cokes consumed, the journaling that were the means of his discernment, just the bald summary statement: Eli perceived that God was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if God calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

The bridge from this story to our time is a short one. You do not have to be Lara Croft or Robert Langdon to make the leap. In fact, many of you have already begun the wondering. And it is a wondering not generated by statistics or research firms, but that simply comes from being with our families, our friends, and in numerous occasions of pastoral ministry.

All across the land people seem fascinated with, and eager to talk about, matters of the spirit, prompted to wonder about other dimensions. They seek conversations to form, test, and challenge their experience and understanding of the sacred and the holy.

From a religious point of view, the interesting question becomes: Where is God in all of this? Is God speaking to those "younger than Eli," less credentialed than Eli?

Can we, the Eli of our time, the religious establishment of our day, have the same humility, openness to discernment, and courage to put aside so much of what we know "should be" in order to hear the new word? As leaders, will we speak the words and do the deeds that allow a new chapter of the story to be heard and told? These are powerful spiritual questions.

These are powerful spiritual questions not only when it comes to this church which we are called here to lead but also when they come to each of us. At those times when God whispers to us, how will we respond?

Of these three impressive qualities that Eli exhibits—humility, openness to discernment, and courage—perhaps the critical ingredient is courage.

Eli said (to Samuel), "What was it that God told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you."

Do not hide the word of God from me! Oh, now there is a mentor to follow, a wise chief from whom to seek counsel. Because even as he said that, he knew the word would contain a word of judgment. The exact wording may have not yet been said but the echo was in the heart.

For God had said to Samuel: "For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them."

For the weeks and months preceding God's words to Samuel, Eli had been pretending not to know. He had been pretending not to know a great deal in spite of overwhelming evidence and numerous wake-up calls not returned. The family had missed the turn. And Eli could not bring himself to face the truth so apparent to everyone else.

Now the consequences of Eli's non-action could no longer be forestalled. Organizations, of course, can always justify non-action. How could action be taken without an adequate survey of a representative number of impacted and potentially impacted? Were all positions included? Were the outcomes clearly defined? What are the budget implications precisely? What would be the upside of not acting as opposed to the downside of acting? Analysis and consultation—that's what is needed!

Now at this point, if I was advising Eli, I would try and shape his communication strategy with God around good intentions. "Yes, the family has made some bad decisions, has become preoccupied with its own desires and practices, but do not we all? Is it not part of the natural cycle of families and institutions?"

Sure, his sons were a bit outside the normal boundaries, but were they not his sons? Should he be chastised because of a desire to keep peace within the family? A father's weakness, a parent's Achilles heel—should that be condemned or rather met with sympathy and tolerance? And had Eli not worked hard, been "zealous for the Lord" in his day? Does not that legacy, that story, deserve respect?

Certainly it could be argued that his refusal to address the mutating malignancy was dangerous and its effects radiated out, infecting the entire family, organization, and religion and his leadership at a critical time was less than positive but....

In his time Eli was faithful, undoubtedly well-intentioned, and probably nice.

And yet we know. We know when we can no longer evade honesty how such infections weaken the family, the faith, the organization.

So the challenge comes to us—as a denomination, as congregations, even to us as leaders and individuals.

Have we become so enamoured with some practice, some comfort, some expectation, some entitlement, some story of ourselves, illusion, or strategy that, in the end, we almost become unable to hear the voice of God or see the movement of God? "Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see...."

Of course, part of us—whether as a denomination, congregation, or individual—responds with explanation. We can make defence. But do we want to?

Faced with the persistence of the voice, Eli chooses another way. Eli chooses to hear another story. "What was it that God said? Do not hide it from me!"

Do we want to deflect, deny, or abstract when in many ways it is not foreign to us and the stories of our people to face the word even when we suspect the hearing will require a turning?

It is not as if we are unaccustomed to the experience of God coming to us, speaking to us, despite our comfort, in surprising ways and offering astounding promises.

The Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle."

Have there not been times when we have caught a whiff of this—as a denomination, as congregations, as individual disciples?

Have there not been times when we have heard, when we have sensed a word, a vision, a presence that was almost too good to be true? Even in the midst of pain, yearnings, deep disappointment, frustration, losses which we hardly dare to acknowledge to ourselves....

Have there not been times when, all evidence to the contrary; we have heard the name Beloved whispered. And everything in our head said it could not be us, for were we not in the midst of failure, of divorce, of loss, of discovering an awful truth, of a leadership disaster of biblical proportions. "Grace and peace to you, Beloved. Your creation was not a mistake." Could that be us?

Have there not been times when, all evidence to the contrary; we have heard a whisper, a call that we were tempted to explain away as compunction? And everything in our head said it could not be us because actually a large part of us is an imposter—we're just talking, it was just a book I read, an idea I had, an interest. Said Moses to the burning bush, I was just curious, why are you making such a big deal out of this? I'm not trained, I lack the competencies, I'm already overbooked, my husband will kill me.... Too old, too young, too stubborn, too set in old ways to be re-created, reclaimed, reformed, and resurrected. "I cannot come to the banquet." But still the call persisted.

Have there not been times when even so aware of the pain and betrayal of the world and the church, we have known deep within us that the Holy One is not yet ready to back away from the dreams for shalom, wholeness, peace, and, even when we cry like Elijah in the cave "Oh God, I'm the only one left!" we have also been away of a force, a power, a movement out there.

It is not as if we are unaccustomed to the experience of God coming to us, speaking to us in surprising circumstances, through unlikely messengers. Do we need to resist?

God, The Lord, says, "See, I am about to do something that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." Could that really be true?

Could that be true for us as a denomination? If so, I pray that we will have the humility of Eli, the openness to attend to the word, the courage to hear the word being spoken to us "from outside," from the unlikely, the uncredentialed, the younger? I pray we will be willing to hear and to write a new chapter in the story.

Eli said to Samuel, "...if God calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'"

Speak, for your servant is listening.

God is on the loose. Oh-oh!

God is on the loose. Amen.