



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

## The Second Sunday of Pentecost, Year B June 2, 2024 The Rev. Scott Walters

A couple of weeks ago, a friend from Georgia was in town for a concert. And at dinner she told us that her husband Ed was a water witch. Ed doesn't charge for the service of walking around with a forked twig until it twitches toward the place where you ought to dig your well. It's more of a mysterious hobby. I don't know about you, but I hadn't given water witches enough thought in my life even to develop a stereotype. But if I had, it wouldn't have been Ed. He's an unassuming, wry humored 87-year-old engineer who taught Sunday School at their rural Episcopal Church for decades.

Ed's wife also happens to be one of the best and sanest writers I know, and the kind of friend whose perspective I'd trust on just about anything. If God has spoken to me at all, God has spoken to me through her. What am I to do with the fresh fact that she is, if not a water witch herself, a sympathizer. Or water witch adjacent, as the kids say? What are any of us to make of those moments when God speaks to us through what are clearly the wrong channels?

The past two Sundays we've heard the call stories of two prophets. Last week it was Isaiah. This week it's Samuel. And both calls mystify the ones being called. "Woe is me," cried Isaiah. "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips..." In spite of the six-winged seraphs, the smoke filled room, the shaking thresholds and all, like so many prophets before and after him Isaiah doesn't think he could possibly be the one God would choose to bear messages to God's people.

Samuel's call is also confusing to him. Maybe you remember the story. His mother, Hannah, had not been able to conceive. One day, in the temple at Shiloh, she was praying so intensely for God to give her a child that the priest Eli accused her of being drunk. But when she explained herself, he told her that her heartfelt prayers would be answered. When Samuel was born, Hannah promised to

give him back to God to serve in the temple as a Nazirite, a consecrated one who would never take strong drink or cut his hair. The spirit of God was thought to be strong in such people.

Eli's own sons were a rebellious mess. Pastors' kids have had a reputation for wildness ever since. And I've long wondered whether the presence of that devout little miracle boy in the family system didn't play at least a part in their acting out. Whatever the case may have been, God wasn't happy with Eli's sons, or with their father, for letting them wreak their havoc in the temple.

When God did speak audibly to young Samuel in the night, it wasn't like Isaiah's call, in which everything was too spectacular to believe. When Samuel heard God's voice, he assumed it was Eli. By the third time the boy had rushed into Eli's room, ready to do whatever the old priest asked, Eli sensed that something else might be going on. Something neither he nor the boy had any reason to expect, what with the word of God being so rare in those days, and visions not being widespread. "If it happens a fourth time," he tells the boy, "Say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

If we'd kept on reading the story, we would have heard that God was "about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." And the news was that hard times were coming for the house of Eli, thanks to those two blasphemous sons. The call story ends with the narrator telling us that as Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and "let none of his words fall to the ground." I love that phrase, even more than the tingling ears. After all, God's own words fell to the ground three times when God first called out to Samuel in the night.

I haven't had the chance to hear Ed's call story about becoming a water witch. I don't know if it was more like Samuel's or more like Isaiah's or nothing like either of them at all. What I do know is that God has never spoken audibly to me or given me supernatural powers. Nor has God sent six winged seraphs to singe my lips with a burning coal. But I'm struck that there seem to be obstacles to trust and hearing even in the most vivid accounts of divine communication. It makes me wonder whether there will always be something in us that we'll need to push past if we're to hear God speaking into our lives.

And here's the real reason Ed made it into the sermon. At dinner that night, I began to realize that one form my own resistance to God often takes is dismissal. Nobody I like or trust takes this or

that very seriously, so I don't have to either. I'll stay settled comfortably in what I think I know to be possible, or right, or true, until something or someone shakes that comfort up.

The other day on my jog through Overton Park, I listened to Pádraig Ó Tuama read a poem by the 20th century Israeli poet named Yehuda Amichai. It shook me up a bit, because I recognized the particular form of dismissive resistance it describes.

From the place where we are right flowers will never grow in the spring.

The place where we are right is hard and trampled like a yard.

But doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, a plow. And a whisper will be heard in the place where the ruined house once stood.

I recognize the hard and trampled yard in me where nothing new can push down roots and grow. It's startling to think that doubt might be one of the moles or plows that break open the packed soil of my interior so something else, besides what I've already decided I'm right about, can come to life. Beautifully, Amichai adds a metaphor of sound at the end, saying we might hear a whisper, a voice, a call, if we'll let the walls of our certainties crumble now and then.

It might surprise you to hear that Yehuda Amichai was an Israeli soldier who served in the second world war and in the war that established the modern state of Israel in 1948. These facts in themselves might make his voice a difficult one for some of us to hear from right now. And you don't need the voice of one more shallowly informed commentator on Gaza, especially a Christian preacher. But it does seem like this Jewish soldier could be asking us how much of this world's violence continues to be waged from the packed earth of the place where we humans are convinced that we are right.

So often, scripture tills up the ground of my heart by connecting my doubts, loves, and certainties with the beauty and terrors of the world beyond me, and asking what might need to happen in me to help make that world a little more healed and whole.

We heard two call stories two weeks in a row from the lectionary and celebrated two baptisms two weeks in a row at our eight o'clock service. I'm not sure which is the rarer occurrence. But for all

of Eli's flaws, he is surely a model for any of us called to hold space for anyone else to doubt whatever settled certainty is keeping them from hearing the life God might be calling them to live. The promises we make for a child [like little Oscar] at baptism are promises for a world in which evil is real and active and named as just that in our liturgy. But it is also a world in which love and redemption and growth are the very will of God, for our lives and for the life of the whole world, we're told.

It took three audible calls and the gentle guidance of an elder for Samuel to let go of what he thought he knew and hear God speaking into his life. What, my friends, will it take for us to let go of what we think we already know, and hear God speaking into our lives? What, my friend, will it take for you?