

*Spiritual Acupuncture*

*I Samuel 3:1-12; Luke 2:39-52*

*Whitefish UMC*

*January 15, 2012*

† What’s keeping you awake at night? If you follow a lot of new research that’s recently been published, you know that if you can’t make it through the night, you’re not alone. And yet, more than anything else, a good night’s sleep is what we each need to be healthy and to have our brains function well.

One African American preacher, Gardner Taylor, once said from the pulpit: “I am for anything that can help a person get through the night.” Of course I am certain that he wasn’t referring to the type of emotional crutch outlined in the song “Help Me Make it Through the Night.”

I don't care what's right or wrong, I won't try to understand.

Let the devil take tomorrow Lord tonight I need a friend.

I don't wanna be alone. Help me make it through the night

† The song was written by Kris Kristofferson in 1970. Kristofferson said that he got the inspiration for the song from an *Esquire* magazine interview with Frank Sinatra. When asked what he believed in, Frank replied, "Booze, broads, or a bible...whatever helps me make it through the night." Hmmm.

† Samuel also had trouble sleeping through the night. He tossed and turned, and apparently he had reason to be “sleepless in Shiloh.” Things had deteriorated in the priestly line and in the house of the Lord. Eli, the elderly

priest, had watched as his sons' corrupt practices defiled all that was good about the temple.

- † In his restlessness, Samuel thought he heard the old priest calling him. Have you seen the commercial for one of the sleep aids on the market that shows the husband flicking on the light and saying, "Honey, are you awake?" And his wife replies, "I am now!" Young Samuel keeps up his restless wakefulness, periodically getting up and running to old Eli saying, "Are you awake?" And all Eli can say is "I am now! Go back to sleep, kid, you're hearing things!"
- † Thankfully, Samuel doesn't rest, for it is God's voice calling him. This scripture passage comes up in the lectionary during the season of Epiphany, a time when we celebrate the manifestation of God in the early life of Jesus, as we heard in the passage read from Luke's gospel. Until doing research for this sermon, I hadn't realized the parallels between Luke's gospel and the story of young Samuel, but it makes beautiful sense.
- † During Advent, we heard Mary sing her Magnificat, in which she glorifies what God will do to reverse the usual order of things in bringing a Savior into the world for the poor and lowly as well as the rich and powerful. I learned awhile ago that Mary's song is based on Hannah's song of praise when she learns she is pregnant with Samuel. Hannah's song of praise becomes the source of ridicule when she goes to the temple to praise God, and instead Eli believes her to be drunk and scolds her.
- † Hannah, defying the authority of one who scorns true prayers of gratitude, resolves to dedicate her son Samuel to God. And of course there are many other parallels between Hannah and Mary, along with Samuel and young Jesus. So Luke based his understanding of God's actions on this earlier story in the history of Israel. How?

- † In both cases, God speaks to a corrupt and metaphorically slumbering religious world to announce that God will bring change—of justice, peace, and promise. Listen to this arrestingly modern note in the scripture: “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”
- † So the story is placed in our time, too. We have passed the age of miracles, or haven’t we? After this there are no pillars of fire, no columns of smoke, no parting of seas or rivers. Most of what follows is a worldly history of successes, defeats, and palace intrigue.
- † And yet “the lamp of God had not yet gone out.” Lawrence Wood says: “Although visions may be rare in the modern world, they can still happen; God only seems to be sleeping. Indeed, while Samuel sleeps, God turns out to be delightfully awake.
- † Modern Christians can identify with Samuel...like him we may be set apart for service...without really knowing the Lord in a direct way. And like him, we are sleeping. We do not fully sense the divinity around us. Exhaustion has so dulled our hearts, minds, and souls, that we can work all day in the temple and never hear God.”
- † Yet God is going to do a new thing, so large that it will make us tingle. And God is going to do it through a young boy. God is going to give us pins and needles and use a child as a delivery system. So says Donna Schaper, in Feasting on the Word.
- † An old man and a young man collaborate to hear God’s vision for a new Israel in the story of Samuel and Eli. They are unsure at first that something authentic is happening. The old man knows the ways of the Lord and guides Samuel to listen in. Eli senses the possibility of forgiveness for his failures, or at least an end to mourning for the state in which God’s house has

deteriorated by the corruption of his family line. And Samuel can learn from Eli's wisdom and guidance.

- † God's news is said to "tingle" in King James Version of the scripture. The NRSV (our version) reads "I am about to do something...that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle."
- † "When was the last time you felt a "tingle" about the word of God to you? When was the last time you experienced hope kicking into high gear, forgiveness writ loud, pins and needles all over your body because you were so excited? With its promise of 'pins and needles' this passage is a kind of spiritual acupuncture." It brings us to an inspiring time of renewal and forgiveness.
- † I have to confess that I felt it last Sunday, the day when we remembered our baptisms and I went to the assisted living facility and the nursing home. There is nothing like the joy I experience when you come forward, faces upraised, hopeful, and a little scared of the splash of water that will be shaken upon you. And when Emma and Neva came with Carol and me to The Springs, the joy they brought to the residents (along with cookies) kept me awake from the nap I knew I needed.
- † Nevertheless, I don't know about you, but when I hear the word tingle associated with an announcement of some kind, it's more a tingle of fear than anything else. The phone rings in the middle of the night. Someone you love relates an unexpectedly terrible diagnosis. The threat of another war, this time with Iran and its volatile leadership, looms.
- † And yet this passage urges us to listen for the tingle of hope, too. So that we don't make decisions based on fear alone. So that we are both realistic and hopeful. It's as if you've sat too long in one position, and when you stand

up, your foot tingles as the blood returns to it. Bringing life and the urge to move forward.

- † But what if we don't hear anything, even when we try to keep awake and listen?
- † Friday night Tom and I watched the French film "Of Gods and Men." It's the true story of a group of Cistercian monks who live in a small monastery in Algeria in the mid 1990's. For ages, the monks have served the people of the small village outside the monastery by offering a medical clinic and friendship and support. The villagers are Muslim, and the relationships are those of mutual respect.
- † The monks continue their mundane routine of prayer, chanting, work, and service until one day word comes of a group of Islamic extremists who are killing and torturing teachers, young women, and anyone who is too western in their outlook or behavior. A frisson of fear runs through the little community, along with those in the village. As the atrocities continue, the monks begin to question whether they should continue their work or return to France.
- † After a particularly harrowing encounter with the terrorists, who come to the monastery just as the monks are about to celebrate Christmas mass, the debate about whether to stay or leave becomes more urgent. The community is divided in what they should do. They have served faithfully for many years and have every right to return to safety. Their first concerns center around "what will happen to me? I am old, I am ill, I am afraid."
- † The monks that wish to stay are accused by those that wish to flee—are they simply looking for martyrdom that will glorify their foolishness and fanaticism? The youngest monk is shown sweating bullets, praying to a God who he perceives does not answer, and his fear distorts his heart.

- † The monks face threats from the corrupt government and from the terrorists for trying to bridge the divide between the factions and to work for peace. Their leaders discuss the situation with local village leaders. When asked whether they will leave, one monk says “we are like birds on a branch—we don’t know which way to fly.”
- † The village leader replies, “No, but you are our branch—without you we will be scattered.” Slowly the community of monks comes to realize that the people they have faithfully served for generations are the answer to their questions about what to do. The monks still face the terrors of the threats and are afraid, yet their response of “Here I am,” just like Samuel’s, just like Jesus’ allow God’s message of hope to prevail in their hearts and community prayers, meals, and service.
- † If we’re fortunate, we will hear God’s voice in the night. It will be explicit and it will be true spiritual acupuncture. It will clear the neuro-pathways for new energy and life. But more likely, our dreams and visions will also trouble us. The signs won’t be so clear.
- † But it seems to me that we will hear the tingle of God’s re-creation, God’s new thing, when we turn our focus from our own selfish preoccupations to those of the community we are called to serve. Whether it’s in our family, our work, our local community, or in the world, we are meant to be instruments of a new creation in which love, justice, forgiveness, and peace prevail.
- † Will you listen, and will you be able to say “here I am?” Jesus knew what that meant. At the temptation, he said, "Here I am, torn with possible ambition." At the tomb of Lazarus, he said, "Here I am, broken and weeping." At the Mount of Olives, he said, "Here I am, wanting this cup to pass from me." Even his last night, tossing and turning, unable to sleep, he

prays for God's guidance. Even on the cross during the worst nightmare of all--he was torn, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

† But at the very end he was at one with the Father, at peace. Picture him there praying that old Jewish prayer that a child would say the last thing before dropping off to sleep, "Into thy hands I commit my spirit." "Here I am, Lord. I am yours completely and fully." (Carl)

† But we aren't as heroic as Jesus, are we? It's okay. As long as you listen with one ear for the tingle of hope, along with the other ear attuned to the frisson of fear. The next time something keeps you awake at night, let the sure knowledge that God's loving and hopeful presence abides with you help YOU make it through the night. Amen.

Sources:

Dr. William Carl, "Having Trouble Sleeping Through the Night?" <http://day1.org>

Donna Schaper, Feasting on the Word, 2011.

Lawrence Wood, Feasting on the Word, 2011.