

A young mother, immersed in the words, hymns, and prayers of the worship service, suddenly noticed that her five year old was no longer beside her. She discovered the child under the pews, crawling among the legs and feet of everyone in the vicinity. Embarrassed, the mother hissed: "What are you doing under there?" The child replied, "I'm looking for God." We like to think that some people who come to church are looking for God. Some are looking here because they believe God hasn't called at home. And some conclude that God only calls other people or God is in fact absent from the world.

Particularly with young people, their life experience may suggest to them that God is absent. That impression gets started early. Every day in our world there are 30,000 children who die from malnutrition or from diseases that are entirely preventable. In our own country there thousands of children who stay home from school because they're afraid of being bullied in the classroom or on the playground. We have the effects of cigarettes, drugs, pornography, sexual pressure, gangs and child abuse. As children look at all that, they're left to wonder how to make sense of such a world.

In the same way, Samuel was trying to make sense out of his world. One night as Samuel was lying in the tent with the Ark of the Covenant, he suddenly heard a voice calling out to him. Since the elderly priest Eli was the only other person around, Samuel ran outside to him and asked what he wanted. After being roused from sleep, Eli told the boy that he hadn't called him and that he should go back to sleep. The same thing happened twice more. Finally, after that third time, it struck Eli that maybe the voice that was calling Samuel was God's voice. So he told the boy that if he heard the voice again to say, "Yes, Lord. Speak to me, for I am listening." In the end, Samuel was able to make sense out of what was happening to him because he had someone to turn to.

Samuel had a family in the person of the elderly Eli. When Samuel heard that voice calling out to him in the night, Samuel was able to turn to Eli, who helped him to hear what God was saying. The gist of God's message was: "Things are going to change. Things are going to be different." Can we in the church be like Eli for the Samuels of the world today? Do we offer the sort of environment where children and adults consider us a resource that can help understand what is happening to them? In particular, do we provide an accessible place where questioning people can receive help in identifying how God speaks to them? Part of being that sort of place is providing Sunday School and adult study but part also comes from the sort of relationships formed here. Recall from the gospel lesson that Jesus calls Phillip and establishes a relationship. Phillip in turn seeks out his friend Nathaniel and tells him about Jesus. Nathaniel's curiosity is aroused because he is seeking something and wondering if Jesus offers some key to what he is seeking. John's Gospel is giving us the model that God calls people and through their relationship with others, a vital link is made in sharing the Good News and bringing new people to faith in God. A challenge for us is that many people experience no such relationship. Can we take those with spiritual need that are all around us and—like Eli did for Samuel—help them hear what God is saying?

Some of those whom we would like to share the Christian story with are children. Entering into relationship with children is not always easy. One day in the doctor's waiting room I was looking at a magazine and I heard a little voice on my left, "What's that?" Thinking I could dispose of this interruption I said, "An airplane" and I prepared to turn the page. Before I could there was another little voice on my right, "What's that?" pointing to a part of the plane. "It's a wing flap." It seems I had inherited two year old twin boys, whose existential survival depended on every

conceivable part of a 747 being named. After fifteen minutes and the forty-third “What’s that?” I found out who was the mother because everyone else had fled, except her. She awoke from what I am sure was a needed meditation period, and asked “Do my children know you from somewhere?” I assured her that they did now. But our relationship did not quite get to the point where I was the elderly Eli. They exited to see the doctor and I finally turned my page.

Sometimes our interest in new people occurs because we are aware that congregation is aging and we are in search of new recruits. We see Nathaniel and Philip and we think of which committees need filling, or which jobs need doing. In contrast, Jesus is not motivated by self-preservation. Instead he sees Nathanael under a fig tree and Nathanael is astonished that Jesus knows him so well from such a brief exposure. Jesus suggests that Nathanael should not be impressed by such a small thing. Rather, he should anticipate seeing “heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man (John 1:51).” In other words, Nathanael will have a direct experience of God. We are about helping people to have an experience of God.

Jesus is the bearer of God’s call to Nathanael and Philip, that they should become part of a community seeking God’s kingdom. We tend to think that we need the right technique or gimmick to attract people to church, but we only need to make sure that like Samuel, we have heard God’s call and that we make a place where others can hear God’s call. We can get overtaken by committees, budgets, meetings, an active social life. And then there is no room for listening. We are too busy doing the business of the Church to just “listen”. Or like the young Samuel, we have heard something that we do not understand and we need someone to tell us that it is indeed God who has spoken. God continues to speak and we are called to be a community that listens. Let us listen and be glad. Amen!