

REFLECTION 14 JANUARY 2024 "WHAT DOES GOD SOUND LIKE?"

By Rev Dr Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

Growing up I quite often heard Christians say the words "God said to me, or God told me or let's see whether this is where God wants us to go..." Or being asked by pious people "Has God spoken to you lately?"

My question for us to consider this morning is, is God's voice audible? What does it sound like? I believe that the voice of the Holy other, the divine mystery we call God is heard through the voices of others, in circumstances and situations that point us in the direction of the divine, in life situations which remind us how thankful we are that we are alive, that because of God and because of the grace of God we have come thus far.

Sadly, over in the Middle East the voice of Yahweh according to the Israelis says one thing and the voice of Allah for the Palestinians says another and yet it is the same God of Abrahamic faith's but different names. So what does God sound like to them? Both hear the words justice, revenge. The message of love and peace for which God is renown to speak through God's messengers like the priest Eli to Samuel is heard differently by Eli's rebellious sons. For those who fight in the name of God the voice of God sounds violent and heartless. The voice of God enacted by God's listeners fall on deaf ears or the absurd.

Henri Nouwen a Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer and theologian says that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self. "We live absurd lives." Then he talked about the meaning of the word "absurd." Surd,

Nouwen says is from the Latin word for "deaf." When you look the word up in the dictionary you will find, "not to be heard, dull, deaf, insensible, laughably inconsistent with what is judged as true or reasonable." It is our inability to hear, to listen, that creates the conditions for an absurd life. Nouwen goes on: "A spiritual discipline is necessary in order to move slowly from an absurd to an obedient life, from a life filled with noisy worries to a life in which there is some free inner space where we can listen to our God and follow God's guidance." Absurd living is simply not hearing and not listening to God. We need to avoid absurd living. (2)

For me, when something happens that I can't explain and is out of the ordinary and makes me change direction or makes me sit up and re-think I consider those moments of the divine and although I did not audibly hear a voice telling me what to do I have often associated these occurrences or epiphanies as God speaking to me. Can you relate to this? Here at SAOTT there is diverse opinion about using the word God even Christ. Some are atheist, agnostic, Christian, and other. There is no right or wrong here, what we believe and where we each are in our journeys of faith or no faith is what makes us who we are, we are an inclusive church.

It felt really absurd the day I heard/felt God calling me into ministry. (my apologies if you've heard this before) It started at a CWM Youth Conference overseas in Amersfoort in Holland in 1985 when Rev. Dr. Christopher Duraisingh who was the General Secretary for the Council for World Mission approached me and asked, "so where did you do your theological training?" I replied, I'm not a minister and I haven't been to theological college. He encouraged me to pursue this possibility; he said he saw great potential in me. I never considered myself an achiever, I

wanted to follow my older sister in high school and do the courses that she was doing like French and other academic subjects. I arrived at high school and was put in the commercial course for shorthand typing etc. Hmm oh well, maybe that is all I was destined to become in life. I left school in 1978 with a certificate in shorthand and typing and got a job as a secretary. I thought that was my limit, I was only trained to do this job and any dreams of university or anything academic was beyond my potential or capacity.

I applied to enter Knox Theological Hall in 1987 as a private student and to study towards an LTh Licentiate of Theology. This diploma was internally assessed and did not require me to sit any university exams because I believed I was not capable. When I suggested this way forward to Rev. Ned Ripley who was the Dean of Pacific Students he looked at me and said you are capable of more, we will enroll you for the Bachelor of Theology and see how you go after your first year. I remember my very first history assignment "How did the Pax Romana influence the spread of Christianity?"

In my head were the words of my 6th form history teacher "Fei means well but will never be I fear an historian". That comment affected me throughout the early years of my life (some educators have a great impact on pupils lives both positive and negative. Words both good and bad stick in the mind not just at school but right throughout their lives. For me, I was stumped I felt paralyzed I didn't know how to begin. Anyhow to cut a long story short I got my assignment back and the lecturer wrote "Fei, I expect a lot more from you, please see me". I did not know Prof. Peter Matheson at all and thought to myself, how can he

expect more from someone he doesn't even know? I explained to him how I was feeling, and my flat mates helped get me past my first essay and after that well, you know the rest.

The call of the boy Samuel is a familiar story to many of us. He was the miracle child of his aging parents was dedicated to God and given to Eli the priest to live in the temple and be his helper.

One night when all was quiet and Samuel and Eli were lying in their beds, a voice called out his name, "Samuel, Samuel." Samuel answered: "Here am I" and ran to see what Eli wanted.

"I did not call," said Eli, "so lie down and sleep."

A second time the voice called. It was God. "Samuel," God called out. And Samuel again rose and went to Eli and said, "Here am I, for you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call you, my son. Lie down again."

God called a third time, "Samuel." And the boy arose and went again to Eli. "Here I am, for you called me."

Then Eli perceived that it was the Lord calling and said, "Go lie down, and if the voice calls, you should say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

And God came and called, "Samuel, Samuel." And Samuel said, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

This is not just a children's story. It is a story for all of us who are most in danger of losing our ability to hear and respond to messages of and from the divine all around us. Sometimes it comes in ways we least expect.

Walter Brueggemann observed that the story of Samuel's calling "is too often taken simply as an idyllic account of childlike faith. It is that, but it is much more than that, for the dream narrative is used to articulate a most disruptive, devastating assertion." (4)

Samuel not only listened to God, but also had to learn how to speak for God. The word that came to Samuel was a word of judgment against Eli and his household. The priesthood is about to be stripped away from Eli and his house forever with devastating consequences for his family.

Eli's sons have thoroughly disgraced the priesthood through their conduct. God was fed up with those sons and used Samuel to announce his judgment.

After the vision, Samuel goes back to bed rather than running to Eli with the bad news God has given him. He is afraid to speak. When morning breaks, it is Eli who calls Samuel to his room and commands him to speak the word that he has received from God. Eli really wanted to hear God's message, no matter how bad it was.

How many people are there in this world who really want to hear God's disturbing news? I'm afraid most people don't want to be challenged. They don't want God to disturb their set ways of thinking. Imagine how hard it was for little Samuel to tell old Eli the message of judgment from God. When we really listen to God, we may find life being shaken up.

Martin Luther King loved to tell his story. He didn't want to be a national civil rights leader. He had gone into the ministry mostly because his father was a pastor, and he had hopes to be a professor, possibly President of Morehouse College someday. Through an odd turn of events, as a young pastor he was thrust into the forefront of the Montgomery bus boycott. He came home late one night, tired, frightened. The phone rang. An angry voice on the other end said, "We're gonna get you Nigger!"

Martin Luther King stood in his kitchen, frozen in fear. He wanted to call his father for reassurance and advice. But his father wasn't there. Then he said it was like a voice. "Martin, you do what's right. You stand up for justice. You be my drum major for righteousness. I'll be with you."

He had heard his name called. He knew what God wanted for him. His life was forever changed and through his life, used so well by God, was the world changed. On January 20th, 2009, Barack Obama was inaugurated as the first Black President of the United States of America. Who would have thought when Martin Luther King "had a dream" that not only would black and white walk hand in hand together, but a Black person would be successfully elected to the US presidency. It helps to stop, listen, and dare to dream beyond ourselves at what our real potential

and all that we were created to be might be no matter how young or how old we are. That our daring to dream the impossible may be realized.

Whether God's voice is audible or visual we see it in nature and all around us or you may experience the nudge from that which is mysterious or in the words of Rudolph Otto, the numinous. It prompts us to respond and as I said last week we might call this an epiphany. We very seldom associate negative and bad things with God often only good things, blessings and celebrations. But in the midst of the badness God suffers with us and accompanies us through the good and the bad and does not take us around death or around crises in our lives. The divine accompanies us through all these times. As Psalm 23 says "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death "not around the valley" but through the valley, we cannot avoid it, and many of us here already have experienced that and God says, I am there with you". So be it. Amen.