

“Voices in the Dark”, offered on January 18, 2015 by Catherine Somerville. The texts used are Psalm 139 and I Samuel 3: 1-10.

We begin with a piece of wisdom offered from 14th century, by a mystic named Julian of Norwich: “We seek rest where there is no rest, and therefore we are uneasy. God is the true rest who wants to be known. God is everything that is good, and the goodness that everything possesses is God.”

My entering into the sermon this week has been coloured by some conversations, all having to do with sleep, or more accurately, sleeplessness.

My daughter is a teacher, and a couple of days after everyone went back to school from the Christmas holiday, I called her and asked how she was doing. She told me that she hadn’t slept well the night before the first night of school, and how tired she had been all week. It seems that her situation was mirrored by many of the teachers on staff. That night before the first night of school, either in September or January, is a tough one for teachers. They tend not to sleep very well, thinking about being prepared, wondering if they have what it takes, to spark this group of students for another term. But one wise person on staff told my daughter that being awake and nervous the night before school, is actually the mark of a very good teacher.

Another conversation.... A woman I know told me recently, that she has been waking up at four o’clock in the morning, for no apparent reason, and how she finds it impossible to go back to sleep again. A thousand worries consume her, her mind seems to tumble and twist. By the light of morning, all these worries seem manageable. But at night, her life has become terrifying.

Other people associate sleeplessness with the aging process. Some folks get up and do something when they can’t sleep. I know a couple from Garson, now retired, who often will bundle up at 2 or 3 a.m., and go for a walk. “You can’t believe how often the police stop and ask us what we’re up to,” they say.

What do you do when you wake up in the middle of the night and you find yourself wide awake, staring at the ceiling at 2:30 in the morning?

Do you do the dishes or the laundry? Some people read. Others make lists. When I wake up, I find it’s better to do something, so I get up and putter, then eat a bowl of cereal.

Often the darkness appears to make the benign seem bad and the bad seems much, much worse. Problems crowd into my bed. It all makes me feel rather uneasy. When we wake at inconvenient hours, we are forced to think about things we would rather not think about, which is why our bedside tables are littered with remedies for getting back to sleep. |”If a book does not work, there is solitaire. If solitaire does not work, there is a white noise machine. If the white noise machine does not work, there is a pill.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, Learning to Walk in the Dark)

A friend of mine says he turns over and over in bed when he wakes up, until he has all the covers wrapped around him like a bandage or a mummy. One night, his wife tried to get some of the covers back, yanking at them and telling him to go back to sleep.

“I can’t.” he whispered. “I think it’s God that’s bothering me.”

Imagine Samuel, sleeping in the temple. This boy was the first-born son to Hannah, a miracle baby because everyone, including Hannah herself believed she was barren until the day she went to the temple at Shiloh and prayed for a child. If she conceived, she promised that she would give the baby back to God. The old temple priest, Eli, heard her prayer and blessed her. True to her word, Hannah brought the baby back when he was three years old.

So that is how Samuel came to grow up in the temple, serving Eli who was 90 years old and going blind. He helped the old man with his priestly duties: locking and unlocking the doors of the shrine, keeping the lamps filled with oil, and scrubbing out the pots used for the various sacrifices. It couldn’t have been a very pleasant childhood, even though Eli was kind and loved him as best he could. The place would have smelled awful with the stench of animal sacrifices. As a growing boy, Samuel would have always been hungry, and his bed would have been only a little space in the corner. At night, he would pull his cloak up to keep warm, but he had trained himself not to sleep too soundly, in case old Eli called him in the night.

On this particular night, Samuel was called not once but three times, and three times he answered, “Here I am.” He ran to see what Eli wanted. It wasn’t Eli who was calling though, but Eli has a hunch who it was. He gave Samuel the words to say.

It proved to be the turning point of Samuel’s life. “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” He was no longer a child, but a young man, who was ready to hear God’s call. The message took courage for him to hear, because it condemned old Eli’s house forever. You see, Eli’s sons, the two assistant priest had been stealing the best cuts of sacrificial meat for themselves and sleeping around with women who came to worship at the temple. The next morning, he reluctantly tells old Eli the entire story, even foretelling Eli’s own end.

So that is what happens when you listen to voices in the dark. It’s a terrifying story, but really, isn’t there at least a piece of it, embedded there, after which all of us seek? We yearn to know our purpose, we long to understand our calling, to want to hear the voice of God. Perhaps we need the silence of night to hear what God is saying. For those voices in the night are often quiet, crowded and drowned out by all the other voices that fill our days.

God comes in whisper, in the spark of an idea, in the image of a loved one. During the day, we are too busy, and talking too much to pay attention. But at night, God comes to our dreams, to our tossing and turning, and maybe it’s the dark of night that we really need in order to hear. The dark of night is the place where spiritual growth can occur.

United Church writer Donna Sinclair welcomes wakefulness at 3:00 a.m. She calls it a winding path through necessary darkness to the place where God is. She says, “In the night, we are

alert and vulnerable. It is a valuable time. This is when we do our best thinking, seeking things our busyness and self-sufficiency won't let us see during the day. When things happen so fast in life we can't think them through during the day, they come back at night to wake us up. The human spirit wants to understand. Insomniac nights are good for listening. The light of morning is fine for acting, but we need the night to listen."

Add to this, the thoughts of Simone Weil (concentration camp survivor, professor of law, ardent believer): "In the night, God wakens our ears to listen and opens our ears to hear. We listen to the voices of yearning, weariness, and supplications. We listen when our sighs are too deep for words. We listen with a posture of alertness for the presence of God, who is already and always present in our lives, with or without our recognition." (taken from Donna Sinclair's book, A Woman's Book of Days)

Clark Strand is a Zen monk. He dealt with insomnia for over ten years, waking up in the middle of the night, and wondering what was wrong with him. In his search for answers, he came across a sleep study conducted at the National Institute of Mental Health, and he learned that there is nothing wrong with nighttime wakefulness. Before the advent of incandescent lighting, the world was dark for as many as fourteen hours every night, and most people do not need to sleep that long. When there is that length of time to sleep, often we wake, spending a couple of hours each night lying quietly in bed. These become rest hours, when we are neither actively awake nor soundly asleep. This was the place for dreaming and growth. But once we learned how to light the night, we cut down the hours we spend in the dark, and eventually we compressed sleep as well. Now a good night's sleep means seven or more hours of uninterrupted sleep that ends when the alarm goes off. For the most part, Clark Strand contends, we have lost the long hours of rest. He sees nothing wrong with a night of sleeplessness, for those are the times when we have the opportunity to be in touch with an ancient, perhaps healthier pattern of being. (story taken from Barbara Brown Taylor's book, Learning to Walk in the Dark.)

So, I wonder, if sleeplessness might just be a higher place of obedience, bringing the truth of our lives into the light, as we sift and sort, and discover the meaning for our days. In the darkness of night, we can ponder what God is trying, wanting, and longing to say to us. The first steps take courage, to listen and respond. Maybe the call in all this for us is not to be anxious, and not to rush to fill the time with busy work. Maybe the call is to rest and dream and make room for God. Psalm 139 wisely reminds us, "You, Lord know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.... Lead me in the way everlasting."

In the Anglican prayer book, there is a beautiful offering for those of us who can't sleep at night. The prayer says this: "Come, O Spirit of God, and make within us your dwelling place and home. May our darkness be dispelled by your light, and our troubles calmed by your peace. May all evils be redeemed, and all pain transformed by your love. May the quietness of your peace enfold us and all dear to us and all who have no peace this night." May it be so. Amen