

**LIE DOWN, LISTEN UP & TALK BACK!**

What would YOU say to Barack Obama if YOU were asked to ADVISE him SPIRITUALLY as he EMBARKS upon his new PRESIDENCY? I've been THINKING about THAT question, NOT that he's ever going to ASK me. But he IS a member of our denomination, *The United Church of Christ*, and I DO suspect that he HAS asked SOMEONE from our denomination for some SPIRITUAL guidance at this time. OR, maybe he reads the daily DEVOTIONALS that come via E-MAIL every morning to those of us in the *United Church of Christ* who have signed up to RECEIVE them. A few WEEKS ago, in one of those daily devotions, my colleague from Wellesley, Massachusetts, Martin Copenhaver, talked about the NEED for our new President to strive and pray for WISDOM, as King Solomon did in the Bible, in the *First Book of Kings*, when he first BECAME the king of Israel, replacing his father, David. Well, what might YOU say to Barack Obama. I know what I'D say. I'd say: *Barack, you need to lie DOWN, listen UP, and talk BACK!* And I would SAY that because I believe that, MOST of all, he NEEDS to be listening for GOD'S voice, and GOVERNING as BEST he can, according to GOD'S vision and GOD'S values and GOD'S purposes. And I would say it THAT way -- *LIE down, listen UP and TALK back* -- because THAT'S the MODEL for dialoguing with God that is found in the BIBLICAL story of SAMUEL. So, let's LOOK at that biblical story.

The story of Samuel begins with PAIN, the pain of HANNAH, his mother. Her husband had 2 wives, and the OTHER one, her RIVAL, would pick on her unmercifully because she was NOT able to bear children. And Hannah would WEEP and PRAY, but nothing changed. Finally, Hannah goes to the TEMPLE and weeps BITTERLY before God. She promises that, IF she can just bear a SON, she will CONSECRATE her son to God's SERVICE. Well, amazingly her prayer is ANSWERED and she bears a SON! And sure enough, AFTER he is weaned, she takes the child to the TEMPLE to be brought up by the old priest, ELI. And poor Samuel: his ENTIRE childhood is spent in the temple at Shiloh, assisting ELI, training to become a full-time servant of God, and loyally WAITING upon Eli's family. And Eli's SONS were just OUT of control! They were greedy, gluttonous, self-centered people, who CHEATED, and STOLE from, people who CAME to the Temple to worship. And poor Samuel: THEY were his ONLY role models. So he MUST have WONDERED: *I thought I was here for GOD, but God seems so SILENT! Not ONCE have I discerned God's PRESENCE in the Temple, OR God's PURPOSE for my LIFE. I've been DEDICATED to God, but NOW what?* Yes, he MUST have been CONFUSED and in need of some GUIDANCE! He NEEDED to hear GOD'S voice!

Well, I can RELATE to that feeling, can't YOU? I mean: you and I have given OUR lives to God TOO! We've COMMITTED ourselves to trying to LIVE our faith day-by-day, even moment-by-moment. And yet, WHAT does that MEAN in a world, and in a culture, like OURS? After all: there are so MANY voices in this world, and SO much NOISE in our lives! HOW can we discern GOD'S voice in the midst of all these OTHER voices? I don't know about YOU, but that's MY continuous struggle! It's just SO difficult to hear GOD'S voice in the midst of all the CLAMOR around us! SO, like Samuel, WE need some INSTRUCTIONS! How DO we hear God SPEAKING to us, and informing our LIVING? Well, there are MANY sources of instruction these days. People are turning to all sorts of spiritual GUIDES and GURUS! We ALSO find them on TV and RADIO, and in MOVIES and songs. For example: I remember a SONG that was popular a few YEARS ago that gave a pretty GOOD set of instructions. It was a song by Peter Cetera called, *ONE Clear Voice*, and it's GOOD advice! LISTEN...

**SONG: ONE CLEAR VOICE** by Peter Cetera

As I said, that's **GOOD** advice about HOW to hear GOD'S voice amidst all the OTHER voices. HOWEVER, it is ONE step SHY of being **GREAT** advice. And the story of SAMUEL gives us **GREAT** advice about hearing GOD'S voice in our NOISY lives. And the INSTRUCTIONS are very SIMPLE! Good MENTOR that he WAS, ELI gives Samuel 3 things to DO, 3 steps to take. He says: *Go lie down, and IF he CALLS you, you shall say: 'SPEAK, Lord, for your servant is LISTENING.'* And these 3 steps are good for US AND for PRESIDENTS! SO, if I were asked WHAT I would SAY to Barack Obama AS he begins his Presidency, I would TELL him to regularly follow THESE 3 steps.

FIRST, Samuel is told to **LIE DOWN**. After all, SAMUEL is just like US. LOOK at him! He's so BUSY running around that he hardly knows where he is GOING. He's UP; He's DOWN! He's UP! He's DOWN! EVERY time he thinks he hears the old man CALLING, he RACES off to Eli. I get TIRED just WATCHING him! And aren't WE like that, CONSTANTLY running around: going HERE, going THERE; doing THIS, doing THAT; taking the kids here and there and everywhere, running to THIS store and THAT bank, CHASING this guru and reading THAT self-help book. And ROUND and ROUND and ROUND we go! Aren't WE just like SAMUEL? And Barack Obama is REALLY going to have to deal with that kind of BUSY-NESS in his life as our PRESIDENT!

Well, as far as I'M concerned, buying INTO all that busyness is the BEST way to get LOST and CONFUSED! When I was a BOY, I sometimes went HUNTING with my father. And OFTEN, when we got DEEP in the woods, we would SEPARATE! And I remember ONE time in particular, I got LOST and SCARED. So at FIRST, I began running all over the place, SEARCHING for my DAD. But then I remembered what he had TOLD me: that THAT is the BEST way to get LOST. *Instead*, he said, *stay CALM, stay PUT, and stay COOL. And chances ARE you'll be found in NO time.*

Well, hearing GOD'S voice in our lives is LIKE that. Getting BUSIER and busier is NOT the way to discover God's guiding VOICE. SO, instead of getting NERVOUS and seeking ADVICE from this one and that one about how to HEAR God's voice, WE just need to SLOW down, as Peter Cetera says. Remember: the word of God does NOT come to Samuel while he's ON the run, or while he's on some sort of special PILGRIMAGE, or while he's attending a self-help seminar, or while he's WORKING around the clock. The word of God COMES to Samuel while he's lying on his OWN bed. And SO, Eli tells him to go BACK and LIE down! And I think THAT'S another way of saying: *Let GO, SAMUEL*. I mean, ISN'T Samuel's lying DOWN is a kind of SURRENDER? ALL of that jumping up and down, and running back and forth, is just SAMUEL'S way of trying to CONTROL this strange, unnerving ENCOUNTER he's experiencing. But ELI has the wisdom to TELL him to just *LET GO*, to just *lie DOWN and listen UP*.

And THAT'S the SECOND step! Lie down and **listen UP**! And Peter Cetera is still WITH us, isn't he? In order to HEAR God's voice, Samuel HAS to be quiet and **LISTEN**. And THAT'S true for ALL of us. The PROBLEM is that we seem to have a compulsion these days to FILL the air with SOUND: RADIOS, TV's, and even ELEVATOR music constantly! How RARE it IS these days to have SILENCE! But ALL this NOISE just KEEPS us from HEARING God's voice. SO, IF we are feeling stressed, or frightened, or desperate because we lack VISION and PURPOSE and MEANING in our lives, talking ENDLESSLY about our distress, or BUSYING ourselves with a host of OTHER things, is NOT the best kind of THERAPY.

BEFORE Samuel can become God's MOUTHPIECE (which is WHAT he will become in Israel), he HAS to become an EAR, an EAR carefully COCKED toward the DIVINE and SENSITIVE to the faintest RUSTLE in the night. You know: there are so MANY times when ALL we hear is STATIC, when there's just too much INTERFERENCE in our lives to HEAR God's transmissions CLEARLY. But like a RADIO, we NEED to *stay tuned*. We NEED to be like so many HEARING-IMPAIRED people, who learn how to actually FEEL the sounds, who learn how to LISTEN with their whole

BODY, who BECOME as sensitive as a SEISMOGRAPH to the sounds AROUND them. Yes, THAT'S how we LISTEN for God -- with our WHOLE being, and in SILENCE!

And finally, the **THIRD** step that Eli gives to Samuel -- and THIS is where Peter Cetera falls SHORT -- is that Samuel is told to RESPOND, to **TALK BACK** to God, and to let God know he's LISTENING. It's a DIALOGUE, you see. After all, IF God had ONLY been interested in COMPANIONSHIP, the work of CREATION would have come to a HALT after God created DOGS! Dogs are WONDERFUL companions! They COME when you CALL! They lie DOWN at your FEET. They take long WALKS with you! And most of ALL, they show you UNCONDITIONAL, unending, and unmerited LOVE! However, God was NOT satisfied with mere COMPANIONSHIP! God wanted RELATIONSHIP! God wanted DIALOGUE! And therefore, God created a being capable of RELATING! And TRUE relating requires an intentional EXCHANGE of ideas and emotions. Yes, GOD wanted a RELATIONSHIP with Samuel. If God had only wanted SAMUEL to become an ORACLE for some divine message, there would have been NO reason for God to HESITATE, and WAIT, after each of the first 3 calls. SO, Eli says to Samuel: **TALK BACK**. *Speak UP when the VOICE comes to you AGAIN.*

You see: what GOD wants from SAMUEL is an ANSWER. And that's ALWAYS true! God ALWAYS waits for us to RESPOND, or to QUESTION, or even to CHALLENGE the divine WORD that we hear. And THAT'S because God does NOT want play PUPPETS for all eternity! God wants RELATIONSHIPS! God wants DIALOGUE! Now, SOMETIMES that DIALOGUE is nothing more than our saying **YES**, as SAMUEL does when he finally HEARS the word of God. But MANY times, our DIALOGUE with God is far more INTERACTIVE, and sometimes even ARGUMENTATIVE! I mean: LOOK at the biblical stories of ABRAHAM and MOSES, JOB and JONAH and JEREMIAH, and so many MORE of our biblical HEROES! If these stories teach us ONE thing, they teach us that GOD has NEVER been afraid of a little discussion and debate. AND, we even see God changing God's divine MIND once-in-a-while in the Bible. But WHEN was the last time that YOU talked back to GOD? WHEN was the last time that YOU argued with God and carried on a DIALOGUE or a DEBATE? Friends, this THIRD step is SO important, yet so often, it is FORGOTTEN! Please do NOT forget it. And I hope that Barack Obama never forgets it either! WE need to be like TEVYE in *Fiddler on the Roof*! Don't you just LOVE the way TEVYE talks with God? If you haven't SEEN that video, SEE it! It's WELL worth it!

You know, I WONDER sometimes: if Samuel had NOT taken Eli's ADVICE, and RESPONDED to God's call when he DID, WHAT would have happened? HOW much LONGER would it have BEEN before God APPROACHED Samuel AGAIN? Likewise, HOW many times do WE complain, as it SAYS in scripture, because *there is NO frequent VISION in our lives*, because we just DON'T hear God's VOICE informing our day-by-day living. And yet, the TRUTH is that, MOST of the time, WE are just so BUSY running around with our eyes and ears and mouths CLOSED to God, so that we don't HEAR God's voice when it DOES speak to us. Well friends, God WANTS to INFORM our day-to-day living, so that our LIVES may be FULL and MEANINGFUL, peaceful and JOYFUL. We see it so CLEARLY in the scriptures! God WANTS to inform our living. And therefore, LIKE Samuel, WE need to learn old Eli's 3 basic STEPS for relating to God. WE need to LEARN to **lie DOWN, listen UP, and talk BACK**. And I suspect that our new President ALSO needs to learn these 3 steps: to **lie DOWN, listen UP, and talk BACK**. So THAT'S how I would ADVISE Barack Obama, if I were given the chance. But I WON'T be given the chance, so I'll advise YOU instead. Give Eli's 3 STEPS for relating to God a TRY! And LIKE Samuel, you will be GLAD you DID. Amen.