

How Do I Know?

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Hearing this story about Samuel makes me worry.

Would I have noticed God's quiet voice in the night?

Is my life spacious enough, that I could hear the Holy One whisper?

One of my worst habits, which I confess to you here, is that I always sleep with my iPhone on the table about 6 inches from my head.

It is usually the last thing I look at before I fall asleep, and the first thing I look at when I wake up. Checking on social media, making sure I have up to the minute news, and in the morning looking at my emails and my calendar for the day.

There is a whole world behind that little screen. I am so tempted, lying awake at night, trying to remember the name of that song that is stuck in my head, to just reach over and look it up.

Or I am tugged, mere moments after I put it down, with the sense that some new message or post might have popped up in the intervening seconds.

If anything calls out to me in the night these days, it is my phone, silently beckoning for my attention.

And so I worry. When I hear Samuel's story. That my spirit is not still enough at night to be attentive to the quiet stirrings of God.

A few years ago, a comedian offered his take on why our society seems to have such a huge problem with texting while driving. Something which, I am relieved to be able to say, I do *not* do.

He surmised that being in the car, driving, is one of the last moments left where our minds are truly free to wander. It is one of the few places where we are alone with our thoughts, and free from distractions.

He went on to suggest that for so many of us, that state of quiet awareness, and aloneness, has simply become untenable. And so, in desperation, we try to stave off our growing awareness of self, by reaching for the phone.

I always block off time during my days in the church office to shut the door and be in prayer. I often feel so fortunate to have time in quiet prayer be a part of my job, because otherwise, I know it would be so easy for me to go long stretches of time without a quiet or still moment.

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I wonder if perhaps God had been calling to Samuel all day.

If as he rushed around tending to his duties in the temple, he had just been too busy to notice.

As he swept the courtyards, trimmed the lamp wicks, looked after visitors, tended to the needs of his master and teacher Eli.

Perhaps that quiet voice had been whispering into his heart the whole time, but it wasn't until he lay down his weary body, and quieted his racing mind that he could hear it.

Although, he didn't quite hear it.

Still so caught up in his duties of tending to Eli's every beck and call, he heard the voice and assumed his master was calling to him from the room down the hall.

So he woke up, to find out that it was not.

Twice he mistakes the voice of God for the voice of his boss.

Twice he hears a call from the Holy, as if it were just another one of the demands of his day.

Until his wise teacher bids him to remain in his bed, and invite God to speak into his heart.

This story shows us that God's voice is not always loud, it is not unmistakably clear, and it does not crash into plain view in an instant.

Even the great Samuel, a key figure in God's work in this world, receives the message quietly, in the still of the night.

A few years ago I was preaching a sermon about some other story in the Bible where God's voice calls to someone. I can't remember which story. I can't remember what I said. But I do remember that afterwards someone came up to me with a question.

How do you know?

How do you know if the voice you are hearing in your heart is from God?

How do you know if God is calling to you?

It is such a good question, and it is one that has really stuck with me.

How do you know?

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One of the best answers I have found to this question comes in the form of an old quaker saying.

When friends are faced with uncertainty, or hard choices, the quakers will often say “let your life speak”

“Let your life speak.”

That is to say, look back, pay attention.

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Say you are trying to choose a career.

Letting your life speak would mean looking back over your experiences with an eye toward what moments made you feel most alive. If you notice that all of those moments have to do with kids, maybe you are meant to teach.

If all those moments involve collaboration, look for a job where you can be part of a team.

Let your life speak.

Or perhaps, you are making a choice about a relationship.

Look back. Pay attention. What have been the gifts? What have been the wounds?

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The quakers believe, and I have found this to be true as well, that this sort of attentive reflection often allows new insights to surface, it allows us to hear and see the ways God has been nudging us or calling to us all along.

It is like taking the time to be still, like Samuel at the end of the day, still enough that you can finally hear the whisper, see the pattern, notice how you are feeling, and pay attention.

Its not a perfect answer to the question, how do you know. But it is part of an answer.

Instead of looking for one big sign, try to see where lots of little signs are pointing in a similar direction.

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In William James' 1890 classic, "The Principles of Psychology" he devotes an entire chapter to the topic of attention.

James notes that we often use the word experience as a mere stand-in for the sights and sounds that strike our senses.

So in this moment you are experiencing the light in the windows, the feel of the pews, and the sound of my voice.

And when you leave you will experience the sky and the pavement, and the warm air inside your car. The taste of coffee. And so on.

But of course, there are such a great many more things going on around you than you can sense in any moment. Our minds cannot

make sense of absolutely every signal we receive all once. So consciously, or unconsciously, we make our choice.

“My experience,” James says one of his best known sentences. “My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind.”

“My experience is what I agree to attend to.”

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What are you paying attention to? That is what you will experience.

And if we want to experience God. We need to pay attention to God. Which means giving our minds a chance to wander now and then, it means pulling ourselves away from all screens and stimuli, and letting ourselves look at the dappled light in a tree, or listen to the din of a noisy room.

It means resting at the end of the day and quieting our minds, and bring our hearts to rest in the knowledge that we are held in God's enduring love.

It means shutting the door for a moment of prayer.

Taking the scenic route. Linger with the kids. Turing off the tv.

You might not hear God's voice coming to you from down the hall the moment you are quiet.

But I believe, that if you can just pay attention, to how your heart and your spirit moves, in moments like those.

You will be paying attention to God.