

# “Speak Lord. Your Servant is Listening”<sup>1</sup>

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January 15, 2012

## I

A number of years ago, Mark Salzman wrote a little novel titled Lying Awake. The setting is a Carmelite monastery outside of present-day Los Angeles. Now the main character’s a nun, Sr. John of the Cross, who’d spent years there in the contemplative service of God.

Now, the remarkable thing about Sr. John is that she saw and heard visions of God ... experiencing these visions of such dazzling power and insight that she’s looked on as a spiritual master. And out of her mystical experiences, like her namesake, John of the Cross, Sr. John writes books on mystical spirituality that are best sellers – obviously earning her religious Order a lot of money and fame in the process.

But unfortunately, Sr. John’s visions are accompanied by powerful headaches and unconscious spells – like seizures – that get worse over time and are also increasingly upsetting and disruptive to the whole community. So worried about her welfare, Sr. John is finally advised by her Superior to seek medical care.

When a doctor concludes that Sr. John likely has temporal lobe epilepsy and that her headaches are a sign of grave physical risk, she then faces a devastating choice. ‘Cause if her mystical “gifts” are symptoms of illness rather than grace, then will a “cure” mean the end of her visions ... will a “cure” mean that once again ... as apparently in previous years ... she’ll become spiritually dry, just searching for God?

And so there we have the dilemma: A woman’s trial at the risky intersection of faith and reason, of religious experience and science, of mystical encounter and the rational, practical life of a community.

Now, you might be wondering what all this has to do with the story of Samuel that we just heard in our Old Testament reading this morning. Well, somehow I made the connection. So stick with me for a few minutes and we’ll see how it comes out.

## II

Now, we just heard the scene of Samuel’s call – as it’s referred to. But do you know Samuel’s whole story? Well see, he was born to Hannah, who *had* thought she was barren. And so she prayed and prayed in the Shiloh temple for a son. And she promised this son to God if he were only born. And it turns out that the old temple priest Eli overheard her prayer. And so he blessed her. And when Samuel was then born, Hannah kept her word to God and brought her baby to the Shiloh temple and left him there ... left him to serve the old priest Eli, now blind ... leaving Samuel to grow up tending the altar of God.

So Samuel spends his early years helping with Eli’s priestly duties ... polishing the sacred bowls, scrubbing up the sacrificial blood from the temple floor, locking and unlocking the temple doors to the shrine ... a sort-of “house boy in the temple of God.”

And at night, Samuel would lie down by the Ark of God with the incense burning ... not quite masking the horrible smell of the day's burnt offerings, trying to sleep lightly in case old Eli called him in the night.

And then, one night ... Someone does call out "Samuel, Samuel." Calls once and then again and then again ... and each time, Samuel answers, "Here I am. Here I am." And then he runs to Eli to find out why Eli's calling. And each time, Eli sends him away, saying, "I did not call; go, lie down again." But by the third time Samuel runs into Eli's room to answer his call, the old man begins to guess that someone is really calling Samuel ... that it might not be a dream after all. "Someone is calling," thought Eli. "But who? Some ... He ... Someone ..."

So he says to Samuel, "If 'he' should call again, answer, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.'" And 'course, we know from the story that that's just what Samuel did.

Now I think in a way, Samuel's readiness to hear had to take real courage. 'Cause part of what he heard that night from out of the darkness were words that absolutely condemned old Eli and his whole household to ruin.

See, Eli's sons had become corrupt priests of the temple, stealing sacrificial meat ... carousing with women who came to the temple to pray ... violating the community.

Oh Eli had warned his sons ... warned them. But Eli was weak ... very weak ... and so made very poor choices ... and now the bill had come due.

So now Eli here demands to know, "What did he say?" So Samuel answers, "The Voice ... he said ... you have been warned and warned ... and you have done nothing. And now it is too late. Your house will be torn down and will never rise again."

So Eli heard this bone-rattling judgment ... and then, then he knew. "It is the Lord. Let Him do what seems good to Him."

And so the scene fades.

### III

Now I want to switch back to Sr. John in Salzman's book for a moment. 'Cause I see both a connection with this Samuel scene as well as a connection with your life and mine.

See, in the novel, it turns out – and I hope I don't spoil this for any of you who want to read the book – it's a good read anyway, whether you know how it goes or not – it turns out that Sr. John does agonize over whether to have brain surgery or not.

And it turns out that the pivotal point in Sr. John's decision *for* treatment was her discovery that the deep walk of faith – that deep walk of faith is a walk in community. And she grasps this insight as she reflects on the care her sisters give her during one of her seizures ... hovering over her with candles, praying all night for her health, loving her in the service of each other.

Salzman writes, "Within a few minutes the entire community, all holding candles, rallied to keep watch with Sr. John. Their presence turned night into day, midnight sun at the end of the earth. Nothing was said, but the message was clear: A Sister might feel lost, but she was never alone."

Lost ... but never ... alone.

And at this moment of reflection, it struck Sr. John hard that she had never really done *anything* for the community that didn't serve her own interest. Yet there they were, staying up all night with her so she wouldn't have to struggle alone. Ever.

And then she finally saw ... it dawned on her ... struck her ... that her seizures had become a burden to her Sisters. So to give up her ecstasies for their sake ... for *their* sake ... would be, if not a spiritual decision for her own sake, at least it would be an honorable one for theirs.

Well, to make a short story even shorter, Sr. John does decide to have the surgery, and in the process – while losing her ecstasies – she discovers the deep meaning of real faith. That our relationship with God – including yours and mine – is ultimately mystery and a kind of darkness. And she also discovers this: That faith finally is *not* about emotional highs – those me-filled ecstasies of our private experience.

But what faith is – true faith – is selfless love lived out in community ... living and loving for the sake of others.

Well, finally, in the last scene of the book, Sr. John and her Superior, Mother Emmanuel, are sitting in the garden – where Mother has just asked her to become mistress of novices. Mother tries to persuade her to accept because she thinks Sr. John could share her deep understanding of God with the new sisters.

But at first, Sr. John resists and replies, “I don't feel I know anything any more about God's will, Mother.”

Mother Emmanuel says “yet ... you're still here ... *trying* to do His will anyway. That's the kind of understanding I mean. The *doing* kind, not the *knowing* kind.”

Neither of them spoke for a while. And after a few minutes, some robins – drawn by the commotion in the garden – called down from the trees. And at that moment it occurred to Sr. John that those birds seemed to have the best kind of understanding of all. 'Cause they answered “yes” to everything.

“I'll do my best, Mother.”

The last words of the novel.

“I'll do my best.”

#### IV

Now I want to connect all this with our Samuel story this morning. See, Salzman's novel is a story of struggle for faith stripped bare ... addressing the meaning of faith itself as doing God's will for the sake of others.

And I think the title itself, *Lying Awake*, is very revealing. 'Cause I believe it may be the case that you find God most vividly in the dark ... in the dark night of the soul, the soul stripped bare of pretension ... in the night of God's Mystery when the word comes ... as it came to Samuel.

And sometimes it's a hard word ... and sometimes it comforts. But God's Word does come to you ... to me every day in our communal lives ... in the lives of others who are given to us. For Sr. John, in the lives of her fellow sisters who sustain her in suffering ... in the lives of Samuel and even old Eli ... who hears a hard word but knows that God is the Speaker and God is the sustainer under all. “It is the Lord. Let Him do what seems good to Him.”

So here's my final point. God's Word is speaking to you and me still, if we're just silent in our dark nights and really listen.

'Course, God never forces you to hear, does He? 'Cause I believe God gives you freedom and then maybe holds His divine breath while you make your choices – those choices that make you who you are. Just like Sr. John finally made her choice for health for her sisters' sakes.

And sometimes those choices are very good ... and sometimes ... not so good (at first for Sr. John – clinging to false ecstasy for months on end, causing distress in her community). And sometimes the choices we make are downright bad – like old Eli's choice to permit his sons' evil.

So ... bad things happen too ... either through your ... or my ... own bad choices or just as our frail, fallen world unfolds over time.

But here's my point. I believe God's work is not to prevent these bad things from happening, but to work right down in the middle of it ... mess and all...creating new worlds of meaning out of chaos ... breathing life into piles of dust ... taking the unbelievable wreckage of your life and mine and making something fine out of it ... in spite of you and me. Because that's who God is.

And you know what? Sometimes it's obvious and sometimes it's not. Sometimes the work of God's hand is so clear that you can see it a mile away. And sometimes, as someone said, you have to dust for God's fingerprints ... as Sr. John had to in the end. But know this, even as she came to see: Even when you feel lost ... you are never alone. Never.

And here's *my* final word. The truth is that ever since God decided to speak to us through the flesh of his Son, his Word has come to me ... to you in your whole self, in your body, in all the events and persons of your life – if only you can learn to hear what they're saying to you.

So how can you find out? What is God trying, wanting, longing to say to you? Well, I think God's message is different for each one of us ... different for Sr. John, different for Samuel, different for Eli ... different for me and for you ... as different as the lives that we live and the people who fill them.

But the beginning – the beginning of that Word – the start of that message – is always the same, for each one of us. It begins when you summon up the courage to say, “Speak Lord ... your servant ... is listening.”

And then ... “I'll do my best.”

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Resources used: Mark Salzman's *Lying Awake*; Barbara Brown Taylor's “Voices in the Night”; *Connect! Uniting Word & World* for Second Sunday in Ordinary Time; *Synthesis* for January 15, 2012; *Lectionary Homiletics* for January 15, 2012.