

2Epiphany2024B

A Story from Eli

By the Rev. Salying Wong

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” These words came back to me, as from a distant country. At first, with my vision dimmed by the cataracts of a lifetime of failure, I detected nothing when little Sam came to me and said, “You called me. I’m here.” I sent him back to bed each time he woke me. I said, “Hush boy, you’re ruining my sleep. Go back to bed.” But, when he came to me a third time, a distant memory of me as a boy, with easy knowledge of God, rose in my mind. I remembered how I used to listen to God. I remembered that moment of a nudge, even in the midst of casting rocks with my sling or skipping along with sheep, a weight would come over me, this overwhelming desire to stop everything I was doing, sit, and be quiet. I would then say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

I realized God was speaking to the boy. He had not spoken to me for so long. The land had become bereft of proclamation. I was overcome with a feeling of anger and shame for the long years of the Lord’s rejection. I made the young boy wait there, shivering outside his blankets while I decided whether I would give him the only thing I had left to give.

You might ask what right do I have to be angry. I was the one who walked away from God. But I was angry. Anger was such an old habit. I was always angry and I couldn’t really explain it.

You know, my separation from the Lord wasn’t a dramatic thing. It was more like watching a frog get used to slowly rising heat in a cooking pot and then, poof, the frog is dead. I am a Levite, of the tribe of priests. I served at the altar. My life was one of privilege. My tribe didn’t pay taxes; everyone else paid taxes to support my job. I didn’t have to farm, dig, or get my hands dirty. The institution gave me everything I needed.

The thing most people don’t understand is that when you stand near the holy as a job, well, you get used to it. The monotony of the sacrifices, the prayers, the waving of incense here, the washing with water there—day in, day out, those very things can empty any feeling of awe you associate with the holy. I literally could think about the next hole I needed to dig for my latrine while saying the prayers. This boredom, it primed you to be dismissive of the presence of God and what God required. In fact, you began to forget God in the midst of the holiness. Once that was in place, well, you began to think perhaps everything that was happening at the altar, well, perhaps it didn’t belong to God. Perhaps, you could do whatever you wanted with the things that were at the altar.

I’m just trying to tell you the truth. Whatever judgment you have of me, believe me, I have judged myself the harder.

My sons, I can't blame them. They were products of my misuse of privilege. They saw me take a larger slice of the sacrifices—the choicest parts. My avarice had no logic. With our share required by the Torah, we were fed well from the offerings to the altar. And yet, inevitably, I felt my knife always carving a larger portion for myself and a smaller portion for sacrifice to the Lord. I fed my boys on food stolen from sacrifices. I didn't think much of it; I didn't think they even noticed. They grew up to be what Levites became: priests. Then, one day, I heard that in the midst of a sacrifice, in the midst of the whole ceremony, with many people there, my sons took the meat in the altar fire, blew off the flames and took it for their meals. Those who brought the sacrifice even pleaded to let them sacrifice just part of the meat. But, they pushed them away. I confronted my sons, saying, do you really want to do this? You're priests—you come between the people and their sins with the sacrifice. If you steal their sacrifice, who will come between you and your theft? They laughed at me! They said, "Old man, God is not here. We've watched you act in the same way."

I could say nothing to that. My guilt shut me up; it shut me down; and, finally, I shut God out. I said nothing as my sons continued to devour Israel's people. And the young girls who came to the altar. What they did to those girls at God's holy place...unmentionable abominations!

So, there I was with anger in my bones, failure running in my veins, watching little Sam shiver. The word of the Lord came, I thought, after such a long time. A longing filled me—a longing for forgiveness, for freedom from my anger, for this old hard heart to open once again. Without meaning to, I whispered, "Speak, Lord for your servant is listening." And did I hear, did I perceive, a faint whisper that said, "Eli, Eli...I have been waiting for you?"

Sam leaned in and asked, "What shall I do?"

I allowed myself to hope that even these old bones had something to give; even this broken man with sins abounding; even this broken heart could be of service. Not like the days of old, in my innocence, when I intended to do big things. And thank God, not like the day of power, when I lorded it over my people. But, now, when age has taken away from me my sight and my hearing; when arthritis has twisted every joint in my body; when I have been dispossessed of all things, perhaps I have not been dispossessed of this prayer: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

So, I drew the boy close to me and I warmed him in my arms, and I told him what to say.