

The child Samuel continued ministering to the Lord under Eli's direction. Now, in those days the Lord rarely spoke, and visions were few. Once, during that period, Eli had gone to bed - his eyes had begun to grow dim, so that it was hard for him to see. The lamp of God had not yet gone out; and Samuel had lain down to sleep in the sanctuary of the Lord where the ark of God was. The Lord called, "Samuel" and Samuel answered, "Here I am." Then he ran to 'Eli and said, "Here I am - you called me?" But Eli said, "I didn't call you; go back, and lie down."

So Samuel went and lay down. The Lord called a second time, "Samuel!" Samuel got up, went to Eli and said, "Here I am - you called me." Eli answered, "I didn't call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel didn't yet know the Lord; the word of God had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called, "Samuel!" again, a third time. Samuel got up, went to Eli and said, "Here I am - you called me." At last Eli realized it was the Lord calling the child. So Eli said to Samuel, "Go, and lie down. If you are called again, say, 'Speak, Lord; your servant is listening.'" Samuel went and lay down in his place. The Lord came and stood, then spoke as at the other times: "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Here I am. Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." 1Samuel 3:1-10

I have stopped praying to God, "Please be here" because I've realized that that prayer doesn't reflect my theology or my understanding of God. I believe that wherever we are, and whatever the circumstances... God is with us. God is already here. I realized that at my first interview with the District Committee on Ordained Ministry, about two weeks after 9/11. Someone on the committee asked me how the events of 9/11 had informed my faith. I was caught off guard by the question and I said the first thing that came to me... proving again that the heart sometimes teaches the head through the vocal chords. I said that I was still, like all of America, stunned and grieved, and that I was pretty sure that Jesus was also stunned and grieved... and that in fact I could picture Him sitting at Ground Zero in the ashes, sobbing. Jesus was here. Jesus, God-with-us, was already here.

Sometimes at the beginning of a community event or a worship service there's an invocation, which is an invitation for God to show up. It makes it sound as if God is napping in God's dressing room and needs to be awakened, or God is waiting off-stage for the cue to come out, and be with us. But the opposite is true. God is trying to wake us, to get our attention. God is already here.

Here. When we start school it's probably the first thing we learn to say, to respond to our name being called. Here. It's not only supposed to mean "I'm in my seat," but "I'm paying attention, all my engines are firing, I'm fully engaged." Here. It means "I am in the present moment... noticing how I am and who I am in this moment... right now... I'm... "Here."

What if you understood awe and reverence and sadness and joy and beauty as some of the ways God is calling your name, calling you to wake up, to be aware of God's presence, to turn to God, to just to be together... here? What if all you need to do when God invites you to notice and be present to God's Presence, is to say... Here? I'm here. On page 3 of the worship program underneath "The Witness" it says:

**Here.** *This is the place where God wants to meet me. Do I feel like I need to wake God, or get God's attention, or do I sense that God is already... here?* Take a moment and jot down whatever comes to you - words or pictures - in response to this.

"We're spiritual but not religious." I hear this most often from brides and grooms who want to be married in a church, or by a pastor, but they can't articulate why this is preferable over a Justice of the Peace or anyone else who's obtained a license. I think it might mean that these people recognize themselves as spiritual beings, but they don't relate to religious organizations. I think what I'm going to start saying in response is that

I'm both: I'm spiritual and religious. To be religious is to be connected, to be bound (the root of the word means to tie or fasten) to other people. Christians know that we are bound together as the Body of Christ... and that love and grace and forgiveness are experienced in community. But maybe being "spiritual" is a different way to experience God's Spirit calling us to be awake and to fully engaged by the wonder and the beauty and the heartbreak in the world, to notice, and to say: "I'm here." All human beings are spiritual beings, and God calls all of us to be awake, and to notice that God is... here.

We haven't been raised or trained in our postmodern country to understand ourselves as spiritual beings. And because we're not accustomed to spiritual practices of mindfulness and awareness, we don't expect to hear God call our names. We might discount the bible story from Samuel as antiquated history or fantasy, but the second sentence from this scripture could be written about us, right now. "In those days the Lord rarely spoke, and visions were few." Let me ask you; how often do you talk with other people about how you experience God, or about your spiritual practices, or about being mindful that God is... here? Often it seems that in hindsight we can see that God gave us strength or wisdom or comfort, which is a great blessing. A greater blessing is to learn, that is to develop a practice, of looking for God and listening for God in the midst of the storm, the crisis, the fear... to find God... here. All of your life, whether you've been aware of it or not, God's been with you, loving you, calling your name, wanting a relationship, wanting you to notice that God is.... Here. On page 3 again, there's a second place for ideas, thoughts, pictures. It says:

**Here.** *John Wesley (the founder of Methodism) identified “prevenient grace” as this present moment when God is here even if I don’t realize it. Can I remember a time that God was with me, even if I wasn’t aware that God was... here?*

If thinking about the spiritual life hasn’t been soul-satisfying, practicing it could bring some relief. How do you practice accepting God’s love for you, even when you’re your worst self? Last Sunday the Youth Advisory Council met at the end of a very long day for me. I had a hard time feeling patient or pastoral. When I am nothing like how I want to show up... I cringe and beat myself up and part of me wonders how many chances I get to “get” this Christian life. I have a soul-friend, Denice Leslie, and she and I talk and pray over the phone every Monday morning. Denice loves me with the love of Jesus and it helps me let Him love me, and love myself better. Does your sin and brokenness and humanness get in the way, sometimes, of allowing Jesus to love you? Do you sometimes think that when you’re a “better” Christian, Jesus will want to spend time with you and until then He might be hiding from you? I’m being a little silly, but the only place you and I can experience His love and forgiveness, His acceptance of us, and His patience with us is... here. Confessing our sin, including anger, bitterness, or impatience, to God and to another person, help us accept Jesus’ love and mercy. Last Monday morning I confessed to Denice that I’d been kind of cranky at the Youth Advisory Council. She asked me what we ask each other when we’re struggling with something: “What’s the spiritual practice (to help, to reveal God) in this situation?” I’d been thinking about this sermon, and I told Denice that just saying to myself, “Here” as a kind of prayer, could remind me that even when I’m not my best self, Jesus is loving

me, and He's calling me to relax, and to notice that He is... here. There's a third space in the worship program for your thoughts, notes, and pictures. It says:

**Here.** *This is the only place I can be spiritually awake. Here. Now. Just as I am. How can I allow God to love me just as I am, to meet me... here?*

A couple of weeks ago I was visiting Mark and Renee Emerson in the hospital. Mark is our Children's Ministries Coordinator, and he's been diagnosed with metastasized lymphoma, and this is a scary time for them. I asked Renee for permission to share this story. At the end of my visit that day, I asked her what we could pray about for her. She said, with tears in her eyes, "That I will be in the moment." We began our prayer with a time of silence, the three of us mindful that we were expecting God to meet us... here. Here. This is where we access God's love and kindness, God's peace and presence. The devil might hiss in your ear, "Beat yourself up over your past mistakes" or "Be very afraid of the future" but Jesus (who is God-with-us) says, "I'm here. Be here. With me. We are together, here." There was a joyful Presence in that hospital room as we prayed together and remembered together that God is... here. Sometimes the spiritual practice is just to be silent, and to take a deep breath. It can be enough to quiet your anxious thoughts and allow you to simply be, here, in the Presence of God. There's a fourth space in the worship program for your thoughts. It says:

**Here.** *This is where I can tap into the sacred moment to access the river of God's love flowing into me, flowing into all creation. What is the spiritual practice to access the sacredness of... here?*

Along with no longer praying for God to show up, I've had to give up using the word, "Godforsaken". This is disappointing, because it's such a fun way to describe some remote, out-of-the-way place. But I don't believe that there's anyplace forsaken by God. I believe that even in the worst, most desperate, and the foulest places, Jesus is there, if we look for Him... as Mother Teresa said, "In His most distressing disguise." There is so much ugliness in the world, so much that's disheartening and depressing. Reading or watching the news can be an exercise in horror, heartache, and helplessness... the worst of humanity gets acted out on the world's stage and in our hometowns. Jesus never shied away from the worst of humanity... intolerance, racism, sexism, ignorance, hatred, betrayal, death... He saw it, and experienced it. The gospels tell us that Jesus went away to quiet, lonely places, to talk with His Abba-Father, to breathe, to be refreshed, so that He could return to the crowds and be present to them, be with them, be... here.

St. John of the Cross is credited with saying, "Silence is God's first language." Jesus went away to be silent, to listen, to be still. Do you have a place - the mountains, the desert, the ocean, or under a redwood tree - that is sacred space for you? One of the ways to practice being here, with God, is to find or create a God-space, someplace special, beautiful, quiet. Find that space, or create it, and go there regularly, "religiously". Show up. And say to God what you said to your first-grade teacher: "Here. I'm here. My engines are firing and I'm fully engaged." And God... thank You that You're also... here. The last space in the worship program is for your musing or drawing. It says:

**Here.** *Jesus withdrew from the crowds to pray. It's important to unplug, to have a place to listen and look for God. Do I have a sacred-space where I meet God... here?*

[Pause] Amen.