

Prayer of Availability  
I Samuel 3: 1-10  
Psalm 143  
“Revealed in Prayer”

How do you pray? When I was learning to pray there were formulas of sorts...

Adoration, Thanksgiving, Confession, Intercession, Supplication. Jesus gives us a prayer—modeled after a Jewish prayer incorporating most of those five. Ann Lamott tells us she needs only three prayers: Thanks, Help, Wow.

The story of Samuel and Eli illustrates another... A prayer of availability.

Samuel’s parents who are late in conceiving, and are eternally grateful when they do, offer Samuel at a very young age, to God for service in the temple.

One night, sleeping near the Ark of the Covenant, understood as God’s residence on earth, he is awakened by what sounds like a voice:

“Samuel” “Samuel”. Samuel wakes up, assumes it’s Priest Eli calling, runs to him and says, “Yes, Here I am”.

“No, I didn’t call you; go back to sleep.”

Samuel goes back to sleep.

It happens again. “Samuel, Samuel”. Again Samuel wakes, assumes it’s Priest Eli calling and he obediently runs to the old man who’s just gone back to sleep. “You called out for me; here I am.”

“No, I didn’t call you... Go back to sleep!” And Eli rolls over.

But when it happens again, Eli begins to wonder. Could this be the voice of

God?

This time, Eli instructs Samuel: “Okay, the next time you hear this voice calling your name, don’t come wake me up; it’s God’s voice.

Just say, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening”. So that’s what Samuel did.

When Samuel hears the voice calling yet again, “Samuel, Samuel!” he does as Eli instructed saying, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

I wonder how Samuel’s voice sounded? Timid? Quivering? Or booming, to be sure the divine ears heard, and maybe along with them, Eli’s? Or did he whisper, afraid?

What would your voice sound like?

When Samuel invites God’s voice, God speaks; Samuel listens.

And what he hears is disturbing—because Eli’s sons, his family of temple priests, have disobeyed the divine rules for sacrificing at the temple; they would be brought down, no longer be permitted to be priests. God asks Samuel to tell his elder, his boss, his priest, that his days are numbered.

Samuel doesn’t run right in to Eli to share this troubling news, but keeps it to himself until morning and only then, with Eli’s insistence, does Samuel share God’s word with Eli.

“Here I am... Speak to me, God. I’m listening.”

Another way to say that is to ask a question: “What do you want me to do through you?” But when we pray like that, we run the risk of hearing something we’d rather not hear. In fact, we may just want to go back to sleep. Pretend it was all a bad dream. This is an “all-in” prayer. A vulnerable , an open hearted, and open-ended willingness

What do you want to do through me? It’s a prayer which opens space into which God may speak and a tacit agreement that the prayer intends to follow through.

Why pray like this?

It puts the emphasis on God’s work, God’s purposes, not our own. It’s not “what do you want me to do?” Because it’s not all about you or me and our plans... it’s all about God’s mission for the world and our part in it. It’s Jesus’ posture in the garden, “not my will but yours”.

Why pray like this? What do you want to do through me?

It's not telling God what to do (so much prayer falls into this trap) but rather asking how do we enter into the flow of God's Spirit, God's plan.

Why pray like this? Why "What do you want to do through me?"

Because God desires to work through each of us... with our unique gifts, talents, time, experiences, wisdom. But God won't force us into anything... until we are ready, and available....

Why pray like this? Now?

Because we are entering into a capital campaign, an investment in the building's ministry. And when a faith community talks about money, and fund raising, we don't do it like the United Way, the PTA or your alma mater.

The church of Jesus Christ exists to be the demonstration of the Kingdom of God to the world. Our purpose is not self-aggrandizement, but participation in God's plan. Our prayers for the project and for its funding rest in God's activity and God's larger purpose. So when we

enter into prayer, it's not to tell God what we need God to do for us, but to open ourselves, each of us, to how we as individuals fit into that plan.

“God, what do you want to do through me?” This is the prayer your Capital Campaign Leadership Team and Session and pastors are praying. It is the prayer you are invited to pray as an individual and as a participant in this faith community.

As I've been praying this way, I've come to realize it would be easier to pray, “Okay, how much do you want me to give?” and to look at bank accounts, and projected expenses in the coming several years, and to do mathematical guesswork about my fair share. It would be easier to calculate a multiple of my present pledge and figure that's about right. I could ask, “God, help me to know what I can afford.” Of course, those calculations may play a part in future decisions, but right now, the prayer is one of offering my availability, not solely my money, for God's mission through this congregation.

I believe that if we open our hearts and keep listening and dare to respond, that we will accomplish through this campaign exactly what God needs us to do for God's mission although it may be larger, it may be smaller than our present understanding of it.

I want to share a story—a story of about being available—the sacrifice and the joy of being part of a larger plan.

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful garden where, in the cool of the day, the Master of the garden would walk. Of all the plants of the garden, the most beautiful and most beloved was gracious and noble Bamboo. And often when the wind came to revel in the garden, Bamboo would dance and play, tossing and swaying and leaping and bowing in joyous abandon, leading the Great Dance of the garden, which most delighted the Master's heart.

One day, the Master drew near to contemplate his Bamboo with eyes of curious expectancy. And Bamboo, in a passion of adoration, bowed his great head to the ground in loving greeting.

The Master spoke: “Bamboo, Bamboo, I have need of you”

Bamboo flung his head to the sky in utter delight. The day of days had come, the day for which he had been made, the day to which he had been growing hour by hour, the day in which he would find his completion and his destiny.

His voice came low: “Master, I’m ready. Use me as you wish.”

“Bamboo,” The Master’s voice was grave “I would like to cut you down!”

A trembling of great horror shook Bamboo...”Cut ...me... down ? “Me.. whom you, Master, has made the most beautiful in all thy Garden...cut me down! Ah, not that. Not that. Use me for your joy, oh master, but do not cut me down!”

“Beloved Bamboo,” The Master’s voice grew graver still, “If I do not cut you down, I cannot use you.”

The garden grew still. Wind held his breath. Bamboo slowly bent his proud and glorious head. There was a whisper: “Master, if you cannot use me other than to cut me down, then do your will and cut”.



So did the Master of the garden took Bamboo...

and cut him down...

and removed his branches and leaves and split him in two.

And lifting him gently, the Master carried Bamboo to where there was a spring of fresh sparkling water in the midst of his dry fields. Then putting one end of the broken Bamboo in the spring and the other end into the water channel in the field, the Master gently laid down his beloved Bamboo... And the spring sang welcome, and the clear sparkling waters raced joyously down the channel of bamboo's split stalk and into the waiting fields. Then the rice was planted, and the days went by, and the shoots grew and the harvest came.

In that day Bamboo, once so glorious in his stately beauty, was yet more glorious in his brokenness and humility. For in his beauty he was life abundant, but in his brokenness he became a channel of abundant life to his Master's world. (Daniel O'Leary Year of the Heart; a Spirituality for Lovers)

If we offer ourselves fully for God's work—there may be sacrifice, but there will always be joy.

In the mail early in the week you'll receive the first letter and brochure describing the Place for All building project. It's a summary; more details are available and any one on the team would be happy to talk with you. We have a master plan—a Phase 1 and Phase 2. Signs reflecting this are may be found on the "imagine" signs throughout the building.

Expect a call from a fellow member—if they leave a message... do call them back! They are calling —not to ask for a pledge, not to talk about that sacred subject of money, but to invite you into a sacred practice of prayer and to listen to your questions and hear your excitement.

That we may all participate in a channel of abundant life to God's world through the ministries of this faith community, let us pray;

Would you repeat after me?

Oh God,

What would you do,

through me?