

John 1:43-51
1 Samuel 3:1-10

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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Relentless

Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening" *1 Samuel 3:9-10*.

I once had a professor tell me that all of life is theological. There is no aspect of life that does not touch both God and us together. No living moment when God does not sustain us with the gift of life. God is our relentless companion. Yet if we were to take a vote and ask who has ever felt the absence of God, perhaps so distant as to raise doubt even about God's existence in tragedy, heartbreak, personal loss, or some overwhelming rush of evil (I know I have), I'm confident that perhaps *all* of you would say "Yes, I've felt that." It would pass.

Loss of contact—with God or anyone—is perhaps least of all a physical thing. Intimacy has a lot to do with soul contact, a far deeper way of knowing. Two people can make hollows on the same mattress yet be a universe apart because they have lost soul contact with each other. There's probably not an adult relationship here that hasn't been there either, at least for a time. So you know what it takes to reclaim real intimacy, how each has to set their heart on the other.

Over the years I watched what lengths people like you will go to fix something with a loved one. A relationship, an illness, an addiction. And with relentless dedication, regardless of the cost in energy and funds, I've seen families stay the course. It often begins by scouring the internet for resources or specialists, talking with a widening circle of people, first a friend, a pastor, a colleague, then with strangers who've taken a similar path, listening to counsel, weighing alternatives.

When Jane first injured her hand the Saturday before Thanksgiving she did the same thing. First we went to the emergency room. Then, on Monday, to a family doctor when it began to look so swollen and angry. Then by Wednesday to a hand surgeon. Not one picked randomly from a list, but one that emerged from talking with people at Shipley School, where she works. It turns out that a world class hand surgeon was right on the doorstep, a parent at Shipley, and Jane had taught his children. Isn't this what we do?—when things get critical we seek out the very best, relentlessly, at HUP or CHOP, in Manhattan or Boston, John's Hopkins or the Mayo Clinic.

That's one side of the equation—our search for the very best hand surgeon—and we found a gem. Before the most recent surgery at Methodist Hospital he came in the room and went over the play list. "First we deal with the infection, then with the edema, then with restoring the upper tendon, then with aggressive physical therapy." Then he paused, and said softly, looking heavenward, "And then we pray." At which point I sidled over to him, grinning to ease the moment, and shoulder to shoulder said, "Actually, I prefer to tell my congregation, '*First, we pray*, and then we do all the other things.'" And he nodded sheepishly.

You may have read Francis Thompson's famous poem "The Hound of Heaven," that's on the bulletin cover today. Thompson was born in my home town of Preston, in northwest England, above what is now a solicitor's office—that's an attorney's office in the UK, just for clarification! Francis had a tender disposition and an overbearing father, which didn't help, who wanted Francis to become an M.D. But that was not his calling, he discovered, neither was the clergy. Instead, he took to writing, becoming an opium addict and frequenting the vile flop houses that clung like leeches to the muddy banks of London's River Thames. Wasting his already too frail body, he was eventually saved from this horrible addiction by a loving publisher and his wife. Together, they nursed him back to some semblance of health and sanity—and faith in God. It was then that Francis wrote "The Hound of Heaven" in which God relentlessly pursues him. Not like some vengeful

taskmaster out for blood but, “with unperturbed pace” pursued him as the loving father he never had never known, finally rescuing Francis when he stopped fleeing.

Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee
Save Me, save only Me? [*called God...the Hound/H*]
All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.

Israel in the priest Eli's day was a mess. The nation had run from God, and like Francis Thompson, felt fatherless. A “word from the Lord” was rare in those days, after all—who was listening? So rare as to be “precious” as the King James version puts it, meaning supremely prized because it was so rare. Neither were there visions any more to Eli, old, infirm and near blind (do you catch the irony). Eli had one assistant, the boy Samuel who was perhaps twelve years old—not accidentally like Jesus with the elders in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52).

Samuel sleeps on the floor near the Ark of the Covenant, where visions and oracles had been more common in earlier days. It is morning, before the lamp, whose light keeps vigil against the darkness, had gone out. Samuel awakens to a voice, and presuming it to be Eli, runs to the old priest. Isn't it interesting how a word from the Lord so often comes through a familiar voice, in this case the voice that Samuel knew best. But Eli says he's mistaken, he did not call, and sends the boy back to his place by the ark. Three times the familiar, relentless voice, needing to be heard, calls to Samuel. Finally, Eli realizes it is the long silent (or silenced!) Lord God. The story speaks of God's relentless pursuit of the boy Samuel's servanthood, who alone will become a savior figure to Israel for his age.

In Albert's reading this morning of the call of Nathaniel in John 2, Jesus tells of seeing Nathaniel beneath a fig tree, a common place for rabbis to study. And discovering that Jesus has looked into his very soul—without a word passing between them—Nathaniel commits himself wholesale to the one who knows him so intimately.

Isn't that crucial if we are to commit to any relationship—to know and be known, intimately. To trust another who leads us beyond our faults, and believes in us for who we are and what we can be—believes relentlessly.

During the 1992 Armenian earthquake a father hurried to the school where his son was a student, hearing that the school building had collapsed. As he went he remembered the words he would tell his son every morning as he left for school, “No matter what, I will always be there for you.” He began digging frantically through the rubble looking for his son. As the hours passed into darkness, and then into morning, others gave up, but the father kept on furiously. After thirty-eight hours of toil without a sign of life, he heard a sound, then another. Fourteen of thirty-three children were alive. And he could see his son. “Dad! Dad! I knew you would come. I told the other kids if you were alive you'd come and dig us out!”

Let's go back to our earlier analogy for a moment, about looking for relief in a time of crisis. We search for the best. Now imagine that you had already built your relationship, your confidence in and love of God, such that the constancy of God's friendship and counsel were a given. Doesn't the alternative sound odd, working so diligently and selflessly—so relentlessly for human aid, instead of seeking God first? To ask God as a last resort—whom we do not really “know” (the way Jesus “knew” Nathaniel), to intervene, seems like hoping for a surprise call from a world class physician at the Cleveland Clinic who says, “I know you don't know me, but I had a dream about you, and I wonder if I can help.” That's not how it works with God either. God has a right to expect faithfulness, diligence and self-sacrifice from us, too. Why? Because those are the conditions expected of us as disciples. Like Samuel or Nathaniel, being willing to put God first in the same way that God puts us first, relentlessly.

A clergy colleague writes:

I know a person who prayed to God to deliver her from a painful and difficult family situation. Her husband is addicted to alcohol and her adult children have paid a price for his problems. They have caused her much sadness in their adult lives.

She told me [writes the pastor] that every night, before bedtime, she knelt at her bed and prayed that God would heal her husband of his addiction and that God would bring some sort of order and direction to her children's lives. Night after night she prayed, but still the problems persisted. It seemed that God had turned a deaf ear to her prayers.

Yet she had something to be thankful for. She had some wonderful, loyal, and very attentive friends. One of her friends called her every day, just to check in. Her friend provided her someone whom she could talk with, someone who knew the whole story, someone who would listen and not judge.

She also had her church. When [her pastor] once complained about [the] Wednesday night suppers and the study sessions, lamenting the poor attendance, she said, "Oh please don't end those Wednesday night gatherings. I live for those times when I can get out of the house and study the Bible and be with friends."

One day she confessed to her good friend, the one she talked with every day, her disappointment and even anger that God had not seen fit to deliver her from her family distress. Her friend listened to her complaint. Then her friend said to her, "But Alice, God did answer your prayer, at least partly. God sent me!"

[He writes] I love that sometimes God doesn't personally come and fix things for us. Sometimes God delegates, sends an ambassador from the royal court, an emissary.

Sometimes, God sends me.

Amen.