



## Living a Response

1 Sam 3:1-10; Ps 139:1-6, 13-17; Jn 1:43-51; 1 Cor 6:12-20

When God speaks, how do we respond? Do we respond with something more than words?

In the eyes of many, he was still not old enough to be a prophet. Regardless, Samuel lay before the ark of *Yahweh* to incubate a word from God. As the people understood it, one who needed a word from God could bring offerings to the altar and spend the night sleeping there in expectation that God would speak, whether in a vision or in a dream.

The text tells us that a word from *Yahweh* was rare in those days. Maybe the boy was playing with the experience of incubating a word from God, even though he did not expect success. Like boys rubbing sticks together to make fire, he did not anticipate the results for which he was trying. More than anything else, it was an attempt to show that trying to incubate a word from God would not work. He was playing with the experience. He took it seriously, but he was focused on it being useless.

Samuel prepared himself to spend the night not in bed, but before the altar. Maybe this was his first attempt. Maybe it was his seventh. Maybe it was his routine, but the text doesn't make it sound that way. He lay down before the altar and prepared to sleep. Soon his life would be upended.

While sleeping, he heard a voice that called him. Half-asleep and woozy, he answered the voice, "Here I am!" He took off to Eli, sure that it was the priest who was calling him. Arriving before Eli, he presented himself, saying, "Here I am, since you called." The old priest did not know what it was all about. The boy must have had some dream. "Go back to bed. I did not call you."

Confused, Samuel went back to the altar of *Yahweh* in the tabernacle. He lay down to sleep again, too tired to remain awake and ruminating over what had happened. Lying down, he heard again a voice calling him by name, "Samuel, Samuel!" "Here!" he answered, running again to Eli. "Here I am, since you called." Once more interrupted from his sleep, Eli responded. "I already told you I did not call you. Go back to sleep!" If things went on like this, no one would sleep!

Samuel went back again to lay down before the altar, not thinking much about trying to incubate a word from *Yahweh*. His attention was fixed on not understanding why Eli was calling and the forgetting that he had called him. In his old age he was forgetting things. Maybe he called then slept, forgetting why he had called. He lay down, conscious that he would not sleep much this night if things went on like this.

"Samuel, Samuel!" "Again!" he murmured in his sleep. Tired and a little irritated, he said, "Here!" Once more, he ran down to Eli, saying, "Here I am, since you called!" Eli was sure he had not called Samuel. He recognized that Samuel was sleeping, or rather, trying to sleep before the altar to *Yahweh*. Who knew what had happened with the kid, but maybe God had actually spoken to him. If the boy were to respond directly to God, at least Eli could sleep without any further interruptions. Whether or not God spoke to him, it would be best to answer as though he had.

Eli told him to answer God directly, saying, "If the voice calls you again, say 'Here I am. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" Samuel went off to sleep, but Eli turned back to lie down,

to think, to ruminate, to lie awake all night, now that sleep had been interrupted for the third time. He was not sure what had happened and the uncertainty now kept sleep at bay.

Once again lying down before the altar, Samuel heard the voice call his name again, “Samuel, Samuel!” This time he responded as Eli had told him to do, “Here I am. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” God began to speak to him, but Samuel was no longer comfortable with incubating a word from God. He did not like the message.

Like fire started by children playing with sticks, God speaking to Samuel surprised him. What was to be exciting brought anxiety, instead. Now that I have started a fire, what do I do with it?!

He had sought a word of comfort, but God’s word was one of warning and call to a mission. Eli had not followed *Yahweh* in full faithfulness. He had let his sons wander unrestrained without really trying to rein in their blasphemous actions. Now God was speaking to him. He called Samuel to serve more faithfully than Eli. He called him to respond in sincerity of living through what had once been a game or experiment. Incubating God’s word had changed into God’s call to completely dedicate his life. He was no longer in control of the experiment. The fire had extended itself beyond his expectations.

Fire is interesting. Sometimes, one works and works to start one unsuccessfully. Sometimes a lack of caution starts a fire with alarming impetus. At these times, it is the fire which takes control, regardless of ones intentions. With God, it is a little different. God is always in control and speaking to God is not a simple child’s game.

Sending Samuel to bed the third time, Eli had given him the proper response should God attempt to call him again. It was not the propriety of the words that mattered to God, however. What mattered to God was what Samuel would do with his life. Would his response be transformed into action?

Calling Samuel and accepting him as prophet and priest, God called him to a life of dedicated service. He could not simply make his position into a game or experiment. Even should others think that the word of God was rare in those days, God was seeking those who would serve him with sincerity. To these, God’s word was not so rare. What was truly rare was that one would offer himself in dedicated service to God. God sought those who would respond in word, as well as in living action.

Eli’s sons had blasphemed and profaned worship and sacrifice to God. Eli had become an accomplice by letting them go without his intervention. It was time for the next generation to formulate their response to God. Samuel could serve God with his life or pretend to be religious. With the experience of incubating a word from God, he knew that God was not to be mocked. Serving God demanded the response of a whole life. How would he respond to God?

We have played with fire and survived to tell the tale. The experience, however, calls us to caution in lighting another blaze. One careless act can become serious. Fire is no joke, nor is God. God calls us to present our lives to him in service and sincerity. God would transform our lives from fishermen to fishers of men. He would transform our human passions into heavenly ones. He would teach us to recognize his voice and find comfort in relating directly with God. God calls us. Will we respond like Samuel? “Here I am. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Are we ready to offer our lives, or are we too afraid of the fire of God’s voice?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*