

# Sabbath That You Might Hear

June 2, 2024

## Do You Hear What I Hear?

This weekend, my family and I were at a friend's for a backyard barbeque. Among our fellow guests was a fellow I know peripherally. I know his name, his favorite beer, and that he consumes conspiracy theories like Lay's potato chips – no one can eat just one!

At one point, I'd wandered indoors, and there he was, glued to some news channel, pontificating to anyone who would listen that the mainstream media is controlled by an elite cabal that is intentionally leading us astray, and that if you want the truth, you need to get off of Google and search these other platforms.

Now, while I know that mainstream media is biased, as is all media by virtue of the nature of communication, this notion that there is some massive, worldwide disinformation campaign that is calling the shots on every media channel from NPR to Fox News and everywhere in between is just preposterous. As my husband likes to say when he's debunking a conspiracy theory, "Show me three people who can keep a secret." The idea that not just dozens or thousands but tens of thousands of people could all be in on some hoax is unbelievable, in the truest sense of the word.

As frustrating as it was to listen to this fellow rant about conspiracy theories, all of which were a springboard into supporting hurtful, nasty politics, this encounter seemed like a perfect illustration of the intersection of our scriptures today. On the one hand, you have the story of the call of Samuel. Just a bit of background: We're told Samuel is still a boy in this passage, and that Eli, the prophet, is old. What's more, "The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." This is due, in part, to the fact that Eli's sons, who had grown up with every privilege, were hoarding the choicest parts of the animals that were sacrificed at the temple, keeping the best for themselves and disregarding the needs of the people. When we hear it put like that, suddenly this passage has some relevance for today.

So, God isn't speaking to Eli anymore, isn't giving him visions because his household is corrupt, but then in the middle of the night, the LORD speaks to Eli's intern, Samuel. In fact, God has to wake Samuel three times, because at first Samuel doesn't recognize that it's God calling to him. I keep thinking about my encounter with the conspiracy theorist this weekend and this concept of trying to discern which voices are of God. I assume, by virtue of the fact that you're here, that you want to hear the word of God, that you want to follow the ways of God. But with so many conflicting voices out there today, how do we know whose voice is genuine and what is a conspiracy designed to bamboozle?

Our Gospel today alludes to a tool that may help our discernment – Sabbath. Mark tells us a story of Jesus' friends plucking grain on the Sabbath, and being critiqued that in doing so they were doing work on the Sabbath.

In the second vignette, Jesus himself heals a man's withered hand on the Sabbath, again ostensibly doing work. When critiqued, Jesus explains that the Sabbath is made for human

beings' benefit, not the other way around. He encourages us to follow the spirit of the law rather than the strict, rule-based interpretation of the law which the Pharisees were advocating. Jesus doesn't say there is no need for Sabbath, he just says that we need to be reasonable about it, that we cannot allow ourselves to be so rigid that we become mastered by our rules.

The difficulty here is we have swung the pendulum waaaaay too far in the opposite direction. When was the last time you had a full day of Sabbath? No laundry or yard work or chores, no running errands? For many of us, keeping the Sabbath has been diluted into coming to church for an hour, two to three times a month. And why? Because we're busy. Because we have so much on our calendars, so much on our plates. The problem is, the more we go, go, go, the less we Sabbath, the harder it is to discern what it is that God is calling us to. If we want to find God's intention for us, we've got to slow down. We've got to listen.

One of the most profound experiences of this I've encountered happened some years ago to a friend as she was interning in a memory care facility. Here's her story:

By the end of my internship, I wasn't eager to visit the memory center to see my patients with dementia each week. I'd learned that it takes a very, very special person who is called to that work, because most often, your communication is wildly limited. Don't get me wrong, it was valuable, but it was hard.

One day, Bill was sitting in his wheelchair when I arrived, gazing through the glass doors into the garden. He smiled and introduced himself, as he always does. He doesn't remember me from visit to visit, but at least he remembers himself. Some of the residents could no longer recall their own name.

As always, Bill and I quickly ran out of things to talk about, which happens early when one partner in the conversation cannot form a sentence. "It's a beautiful day," I announced. "Would you like to take a stroll through the garden?"

Beaming, he nodded vigorously and replied, "Sure!"

It was hot when we emerged into the sunlight, hot and humid following the brief spring shower 30 minutes earlier. Bill, clad in a sweatshirt and sweatpants, didn't seem to mind. We paused before a plant on the verge of flowering. Long, spindly stems with tiny, violet blooms offered a hint of things to come. He was immediately enthralled but had no words even to begin to describe what he was seeing or feeling. Instead, reverting to his only trustworthy vocabulary, he began to count: first the stems, then the nearby plants. Whatever he counted, the total always ended at nine. I wondered what meaning the number nine held in his hidden past.

We moved further down the walkway, heading for some red roses, which were certain to catch his attention. Bill suddenly slammed his heels into the concrete path, and we came to a teeth-jarring halt before a Japanese maple. A young sapling, barely six feet tall, its leaves glistening with the diamonds of leftover raindrops, held Bill captive. His mouth fell open, and he almost forgot to breathe.

He pointed a crooked finger on his right hand. “That!” he exclaimed. Then he pointed with his left hand. “That! That!” We were not going to move another inch down the path. He began to smile broadly as his eyes filled with liquid appreciation.

I decided if Bill couldn’t verbally describe the beauty that had taken his heart into custody, I might use my own words to chronicle the elements of what we saw. “Look, Bill. The trunk near its roots is gray, but the branches are bright red.”

“That!” agreed Bill, nodding until his chin struck his throat.

I discreetly plucked a single tiny leaf from the tree and handed it to my partner in crime.

“The leaves are light green, but they have a rose-colored ring around the edges.”

“Yes, that.”

“The points are so sharp they look like thorns, but, actually, they are very soft.”

Bill tested the theory with his forefinger. “Yes. That.” Then he held the leaf aloft to view the underside. “Look!” he instructed as we gazed. In fact, this view exposed tiny capillaries of red reaching from the stem to each individual leaf point.

“Bill, the underside that no one sees is as beautiful as the top. You’ve made quite a discovery.”

“Yes. That.” This time softly, with a whisper of reverence and pride.

“It’s getting warm, Bill. Perhaps we should go back inside.”

“Okay,” he agreed, with reluctance filling his voice. Clearly, he complied simply to be polite.

I had passed a Japanese maple a hundred times on my walk to school, but never gave it a second look. A man whose greatest mental capacity was the ability to remember his name taught me that afternoon to open my eyes and practice Sabbath.

## **Sabbath**

Friends, I would like to suggest that our overstuffed calendars, our inability to Sabbath, is partly to blame for the nuttiness of our world today. I have a wonderful young woman who is coming to me for Spiritual Direction. She’s a real go-getter, working long hours, going to school for an advanced degree, and finding it hard to fit church in. What’s more, she’s having a hard time figuring out where God is leading her next.

After we unpacked that for a while, I gave her the assignment of finding four hours in the next three months to Sabbath – the assignment was to find four hours IN A ROW (I had to clarify) in

which she will not do anything for work or school or scratch anything off of her to-do list. Four hours to read or sing or go for walks or do something creative. Four hours of not being productive.

### **Conclusion**

As we worship on this gorgeous day, I give you the same assignment. Take a page from young Samuel who heard the voice of God even when old, wise, Eli couldn't. Take a page from Bill, the memory care patient, and revel in wonder and awe in God's presence. Find a four-hour block of time this summer to be unproductive, to reset, to listen – not to what the talking heads are saying, not to the rules that you are keeping for rules' sake – but to the leaves and the clouds and the prisms that refract rainbows into this marvelous world.

Then, once you've done that, do it again. And again, until it becomes a habit. Until Sabbath is a regular part of your cycle of life. Until God's voice is more easily discernible than the crackpots. In listening so, the LORD will not only speak to you, God will speak through you.

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**1 Samuel 3:1-20, Mark 2:23-3:6**  
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