

Who do you think you are?

Andrew Goodman didn't get a summer job that year, despite being a college student. He told his parents what his plans were, and set off to another part of the country, this twenty-year old. His parents had raised him to believe certain things, and it was his belief that sent him far from home that summer, a belief in doing the right thing, in making a contribution to the greater good – a belief that the world could change, if we make it so. Andrew's parents sent him with \$500 in bail money (big bucks in 1964) and sufficient funds to cover his summer living expenses and transportation home if the going got too tough.

Who do you think you are?

The child, Samuel, apprenticing under the old priest, Eli – he's learning to be a priest himself, following the old mentor around, doing the joe-jobs, learning, absorbing like a sponge. He's just a boy, a child, he has no authority, no status. He's a greenhorn, still learning the ropes – or trying to learn from a doddering, dim-eyed expert. It's a great story, this one: how the little boy is told to sleep in the room in the Temple where the Ark of the Covenant – symbol of the God's presence – is kept; how the child hears a voice calling his name, and he gets up and runs obediently to the old guy: "Here I am, for you called me." **No, I didn't – go back to bed.** You can just imagine the old man, troubled at night by a titchy bladder and achy joints, finally gets back to sleep only to find the boy at his bedside again. "Here I am, for you called me." **No, I didn't – go back to bed.** If you think the Bible isn't funny, you haven't read this story. Obedient as any apprentice, the child returns to his pallet on the floor of the Temple, and again hears a call, again runs to his mentor, his priest, waking

him with his eager little voice, “Here I am, for you called me!” And Eli: **No, I didn’t...*(gasp)* I didn’t call you, but **God** is calling you.**

Who do you think you are? It shouldn’t be Samuel who God is calling. God got a wrong number. It shouldn’t be a mere child, it shouldn’t be a lowly apprentice, it shouldn’t be the kid who did not yet know the Lord, the kid to whom the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed. It should have been to Eli, the esteemed old priest, the stalwart of the Temple, the spiritual leader of the community, the one to whom people brought their beloved children and said, “Here you go, teach them everything you know”, the one with stature and ordination and a PhD and a soaring career. How must it have been for old Eli, to realize that despite his faithful long years of service, God wasn’t speaking to him – God was speaking to this...this *kid*. What an insult to Eli – what a shock it must have been to the faithful old man, that God did not speak to him, but to the newcomer to the Temple; that God did not speak to the expert but to the apprentice, not to the old guard but to the young child.

Who do you think you are? It must have been an identity crisis for Eli – wait a minute, *I’m* the priest and he’s the ‘prentice, *I’m* the old-timer, why *I* know this temple like the back of my hand, *I’m* the one in charge here, and I’m used to things being done *my* way...and yet, God isn’t speaking to me right now, but to young Samuel. Eli had to re-think his identity, give up pride of place, get out of the way and let God speak to the kid, to Samuel, without interference.

Who do you think you are? In what ways are we like Samuel in this story – open, curious, faithful to the religion of our parents but able to hear something new? In what ways are we like Eli in this story – in a spiritual rut, in a cultural rut, lost sight of the vision, unwilling to hear what might bring us back to life, comfortable with our own vested interests and used to everything happening the way *we* think it should happen? Who do we think we are? Who are we willing to receive spiritual wisdom from? Who are we willing to receive leadership from?

Globe and Mail columnist Margaret Wenté brought me up short with her Christmas Eve column this year<sup>1</sup>. It's not unusual for the media to look for religious stories in December – usually stories about cute children in nativity plays, soup kitchens, or how public schools now have “Holiday Concerts” instead of the “Christmas Concerts” of yore (this last one is a vain attempt to stir up letters to the editor when everyone but the most devoted crank is too busy cooking and wrapping and picking up relatives from the airport). This column noted that while Christianity is declining in the global north, it is exploding in the global south ~ with Nigeria having twice as many Protestants now as Germany~ and Brazil twice as many Catholics as Italy. The biggest Christian congregation in London, England draws 12,000 people every week – its mainly West African, and the pastor is from Nigeria. Wenté chastises us for a bland and anaemic faith, converting our churches into luxury condos, daycares and homeless shelters, content not to bother too much with church except for Christmas and Easter and the rites of hatch, match and dispatch (baptism, weddings, funerals). We are oh, so sophisticated in our faith, cool and cerebral, looking down on any religious expression that involves emotional shouting, speaking in tongues, dancing in the aisles or syncopated music. But think on this – these younger brother churches are the ones that are growing; these baby sister churches are passionate, thriving, and growing. “The types of Christianity that have thrived most successfully in the global south have been very different from what many Europeans and North Americans consider mainstream. These models have been far more enthusiastic, much more centrally concerned with the immediate workings of the supernatural”<sup>2</sup>, differing wildly from the cooler Northern norms. We might say the churches of the global South are Samuel – young, and in tune with God’s call where we in the global North are old, and our vision has dimmed.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Wenté, “God’s far from dead in the global South”, *Globe & Mail*, Dec. 24, 2011, accessed online Jan. 13/12.

<sup>2</sup> Wenté, quoting Philip Jenkins’ *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*.

Who do you think you are? Who do you think our church is? Can we, like Eli, have the humility to know that God is calling in places surprising to us? We could be threatened or even frightened by the expressions of spirituality that are not our own – songs in languages other than English, in the rhythm of the barrio or the djembe, church music that doesn't go where we are accustomed to it going, prayers that speak with such passion that we are scared into derision. But, as Wenté says, we could be scared or dismissive of this, or argue that “Christianity is simply returning to its roots. It was born as the religion of the outcast and the dispossessed.” It is the religion of the apprentice, the child Samuel, the children we have baptized today, Nate and Caylin, who are called as surely and powerfully by God as any one of us. Who do we think we are? Who do we think God calls?

The bail money that Andrew Goodman took with him was never used. He and fellow civil rights workers James Chaney and Michael Schwerner were arrested in Mississippi on June 21 for speeding. After a search ordered by President Johnson involving the US Marines and the Army, it took until August 4 for their bodies to be discovered buried in an earthen dam. More than a dozen black Mississippians' bodies were accidentally discovered in that same search for the three summer volunteers. Interviewed by the press, Andrew's mother was asked if she, as a parent, wasn't afraid to have let Andrew go to Mississippi to participate in voter registration. She replied, “We raised him to believe in those values. How could we not let him go?” Andrew, like most of the civil rights volunteers, was young, a student. He was like Eli, called by God. It is the young that have the courage to change the world, and God knows, there is much in the world that still needs changing.

Who do you think you are? What does the voice of God sound like to you? When God's roll call lands on our ears, may we answer, “Here I am.”

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Calling God, you wake us in the dark of night,  
Your insistent justice keeping us from the oblivion of sleep.  
You wake us in the dark of night, the warmth of our beds, and urge us to open our hearts.  
And so, opening to the hurts of the world,  
We lift up to you

- the nation of Haiti, still struggling to rebuild two years after an earthquake
- the nation of Iran, following the assassination of one of their scientists, and the fear of unrest
- the people of North Korea who did not adequately mourn the death of their dictator, who may be sent to forced labor camps in punishment
- the First Peoples of this land, remembering especially those on isolated reserves with substandard housing and no running water

Calling God, you wake us in the dark of night, in the warmth of our beds, and urge us to open our hearts.

In celebration on this baptism Sunday, we give thanks for Caylin and Nate, for the love they already give and receive. We pray for their parents, Roy and Christine, Gordon and Dora, and their siblings, Ryan, Ashley and Kate, that the love in their families be generous, and their faith ever deepening. We pray for the sense of family present in this congregation, and pray that our love for all who enter our doors be generous. We pray that our faith be ever deepening, and our many ministries make a difference in the world.

Calling God, you wake us in the dark of night, in the warmth of our beds, and urge us to open our hearts. Today, on the birthday of Martin Luther King, we rejoice with thankful hearts for all he achieved, and for the work of so many in the civil rights movement. We pray, O God, that you continue to call up such prophets and leaders in our midst to give us courage for the struggles of our day and our place, that we will not be silent about things that matter, that we might answer with confidence King's urgent question, "What are you doing for others?"

Calling God, be with us on our journeys, we pray, as we seek to live in faithfulness, in love, and in joy. Amen.