

Sunday, January 15, 2012: 1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20); John 1:43-51

I often feel that my whole time in ministry has been one when the word of the Lord is rare and visions not widespread.

by [Cynthia D. Weems](#) in the [January 11, 2012](#) issue

Some years ago, when I was in my first pastoral appointment, I met an 11-year-old named Victor at youth court. A friend had asked me to serve as translator for Victor's father, who spoke only Spanish, because Victor was about to be tried for shooting a child in the leg with a BB gun. Violence and trouble were part of life in Victor's neighborhood. In the Gospel of John, when Nathanael asks Philip if anything good can come out of Nazareth, he might have been talking about Victor's neighborhood or about kids like Victor.

After the jury had deliberated, Victor was given the maximum punishment of 25 hours of community service plus four jury duties at youth court. As I explained the verdict to his father, I realized that the family lived only blocks from the church I served in the urban core of our Midwestern city. It was decided that Victor would begin his community service hours at our church the next day.

His first task was to help clean up an unused youth room on the third floor. It was hot, dusty and messy up there—not a particularly congenial setting for someone trying to maintain moussed, spiked hair. But Victor took the task seriously and assured me he could make a difference in the room. If he did, I told him, the room could become a youth room for him and his friends.

It didn't take Victor long to turn that musty room around. At one point he came across a large cross that he placed on a table so that the two objects resembled an altar. He then positioned the entire apparatus—altar and all—in front of the east window. He told me that he had considered many places for the cross, but this seemed to be the most fitting. "This is a church, isn't it? Every church should have a cross in the window so those of us on the outside can see it."

Victor had one more responsibility during those weeks. We needed help with vacation Bible school. Victor wasn't sure about doing any kind of "school" in the summer, but he said he'd help. When he invited his friends, our VBS was blessed by Javier, Pedro and Fernando.

We are told in 1 Samuel, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." I often feel as though all my years in ministry have been spent in times when the word of the Lord was rare and visions not widespread. I imagine a time when the Lord's voice might be clear and ever present. I pray for visions that draw a picture of what the future of our congregation, community and city will look like. Must the voice of the Lord feel so distant? Must we wait like Samuel, so attentive to the needs and voices of others that we begin to mistake the Lord's voice for yet another demand on our time, energy and resources?

The request to go to youth court came only weeks after I'd begun my first full-time appointment in a parish. I was so neck deep in the "stuff" of ministry that I was hesitant to provide this translation favor for a friend. Did I really have time to assist a kid accused of shooting another kid with a BB gun? Every parishioner was waiting for a home visit; the music director was asking for Sunday's scriptures; the district needed members for a task force on urban ministry. Then came the call to help Victor. I have been called once already, I thought. Please, everyone, stop calling me!

These days our congregations struggle to make sense of the way cultural change has pummeled our identity. Pastors seek refuge from the voices crying out for their attention, few of which resemble the voice of God. Like Samuel, we continue to get up and tend those who are crying out in need.

Then Samuel receives a word from his wise mentor, Eli. "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

Eli sensed what was coming over Samuel. Even though the word of the Lord was rare in those days too, and visions were not widespread, Eli counseled Samuel to go, wait and prepare for God's voice.

During the week of vacation Bible school with Victor assisting me and his friends participating, his buddy Pedro came to me with a question: "Pastor, you know those community service hours that Victor has? How can I get some of those?"

I was stunned to attention. All of the other voices crying out for attention stopped. I was silent. Then I listened. The voice of the Lord was about to speak a new vision. It was clear and came with a challenge: Do kids have to shoot someone with a BB gun before they are invited into your church?

From that day on, Victor and his friends guided our Wednesday afternoon youth ministry on the third floor of that church in a once dusty, messy room. The cross stayed in the east window, but more and more young people began to see it from inside rather than from the outside. Victor and his friends respectfully demanded access to a building they thought had been closed to them, a space where the word of the Lord was rare and visions not widespread—until their voices cried out.

Later Jesus would say to Nathanael and his doubts, "You will see greater things than these." Indeed we will.