

1 Samuel 3:1-21

The wilderness lessons are over, and the people have settled into the land God promised Abraham. After Moses, and then Joshua, the Israelites are led by a series of judges who rise up in difficult times. As the book of Judges comes to an end, tribal wars threaten to tear the people apart. The promised land is not easy and without conflict.

The Book of 1 Samuel opens not in the halls of power, but in the house of a man who is remembered only in this book. Elkanah is married to two women, and Hannah, his favourite, is barren. Hannah begs God for a child and during her prayer encounters the priest, Eli, who is less than comforting, accusing the praying woman of being drunk! Despite this initial encounter, Eli tells Hannah that her prayer will be answered. Hannah has her long-awaited child, does as she promised, and gives the child to God; so the boy, Samuel, lives with Eli at the holy place in Shiloh.

This family structure may appear strange or even immoral to us, but it was common for the time. To us, Hannah's promise to God may appear rash, but the dedication of her son to God is akin to the sacrament of baptism or the dedication of an infant. In this sacrament, we confirm God's blessing and God's call upon the life of a child. We affirm, just as Hannah does, that our children do not belong to us, but are given to us by God. All children develop their own relationship with God, and it is our responsibility to nurture that relationship so that it blossoms as the child grows.

Samuel lives in a precarious time when “messages from the Lord were very rare”. This is a continuation of the problem at the end of book of Judges where “all the people did what was right in their own eyes”. In the preceding chapter, we learn how Eli’s own sons did what was right in their own eyes rather than God’s eyes in their work as priests. The times are as dark as the night that falls at the beginning of the story.

The boy, Samuel, is bedded down in the temple with the Ark of the Covenant while Eli slept in another room. The boy hears a voice calling and runs to Eli to ask what he wants.

Poor young Samuel is confused when he hears the voice calling him – not just average confused, but *really* confused. Three times, Samuel responds to a calling. Among those three times, Samuel responds, “Here I am” four times, once to God and three times to Eli. Although Samuel’s obedience and spirit are admirable, he mistook an ailing Eli for God’s actual voice.

The narrator then adds a brief description of the state of Eli, noting that his “eyesight had begun to grow dim, so that he could not see”. It might be tempting to see the description of Eli’s failing eyesight as a metaphor for a lack of vision in the aging priest, but Eli sees through all of the confusion of that night clearly. He finally realizes that it is God calling Samuel and instructs the boy in the proper response to a divine word.

He anticipates the content of the message urging Samuel not to withhold any

part of it from him accepting the hard word against his family with: "It is the Lord's will. Let him do what he thinks best." Eli's eyesight may be failing, but his insight is sharp. He responds to the oracle of judgment with dignity and humility.

Theologian and author Barbara Brown Taylor, describes what the boy prophet's life in the temple might have looked like:

"We can only guess what it was like for Samuel as the faithful brought their burnt-offerings, their sin-offerings, and their guilt-offerings to the temple. They were burdened, ashen-faced people, most of them, hauling their stubborn animals up to the altar to be killed. There was a great deal of blood, blood splashed on the altar and blood sprinkled on the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the sanctuary. The burning incense did battle with the smell but could not beat it; the place stank, no getting around it. Maybe Samuel tended the cauldron where the sacrificial meat was boiled, or helped Eli locate the portion he was allowed to eat as the temple priest. Maybe Samuel was allowed to feed on some of the scraps himself; there was little else for a growing boy to eat."

"At night he lay down by the ark of God, the legendary throne of the invisible king Yahweh that Israel carried into battle at the head of her armies. It was reputed to contain all the sacred relics of the nation's past: a container of manna, Aaron's budded rod, the tablets of the covenant. Sleeping next to it had to be like sleeping in a graveyard, or under a

volcano."

Not a day or a boyhood spent in the park, but a boyhood spent in close proximity to all that was considered sacred in his day. A boyhood spent in the very household of God. Over the years of his apprenticeship, he would have enjoyed an insider's view of religious life. The language of faith would have been his first language – the language he spoke most fluently. He would have handled holy objects, listened to whispered prayers. He would have seen the contradictions, the intrigues, the scandals. Yet he would have been primed to know God early and well.

There's a big difference between knowing about God, and knowing God. The writer of 1st Samuel may have also been saying something bolder: something about the spiritual risk involved in becoming too insular; too "churchy", something about the shadowy side of human institutions – even the most well-meaning and well-run religious ones; something about the necessary role of the outsider-as-prophet. Is it possible that our churchiness dulls our ears to God's call?

If so, we can take comfort in the fact that God didn't give up on Samuel. He called, called, and called again. He called until Samuel learned how to listen. According to the religious hierarchies of the day, the people who should have heard God's voice in this story were Eli and his sons. They were the authorities, the ultimate insiders by birth and by vocation. But they were not the ones God chose.

Instead, God chose Samuel, a child, a boy on the periphery, a child who wasn't bound by the political interests of his elders, a child who could tolerate an

unfamiliar voice and an uncomfortable message that would upend the very institution he knew best.

God's word to Samuel reveals the next phase of God's activity and establishes Samuel's prophetic credibility. But within this familiar story, we can sometimes miss significant details as the Bible tends to be very brief.

In light of the very positive relationship that Samuel and Eli share, it is interesting that the reason for the judgment of Eli's house is the relationship between Eli and his own sons. Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli, are blaspheming by eating the choicest parts of the sacrificial animals, the parts that are to be given to God, and Eli has failed to restrain them. Even when confronted by those who are offering the sacrifice, the sons of Eli refuse to give the fatty parts of the animal to YHWH. Their appetites lead them to abuse their power, insult YHWH, and put their own desires above the needs of the people they serve.

“Messages from the Lord were very rare, visions were quite uncommon.” Many places in the Bible describe God as forgetful, ignorant, remote, deaf, and even asleep. In today's reading, God is portrayed as speechless. It's as if God is unable or unwilling to talk. We generally don't interpret these descriptions of God in a literal way. We explain these unflattering depictions of God as "anthropomorphisms", or as paltry human attempts to describe God who is ultimately beyond description, and to articulate the experience of many people today as the loneliness of abandonment in a silent world.

After the Asian tsunami that killed 225,000 people in 11 countries (December 26, 2004), a little Indonesian boy remarked on television, "We have left our traditional ways, and so God was angry with us. He abandoned us. I think I am alive today to tell our people this." Indonesia is no more wicked or deserving of divine punishment than any other country, and in the Gospel of John Jesus discouraged linking human misfortune with divine punishment. But that little boy was on to something, He was right to describe divine activity as mysteriously intertwined with human choices, to picture human history as a dynamic synergism between God's speech and humanity's response. History is not mechanistic; it consists of the interplay between the free decisions of people and the sovereign love of God.

The silence of God and the absence of visions were not just a subjective feeling, a poetic anthropomorphism, or a human projection onto their image of God. Rather, Samuel accurately described an objective state of affairs. His day was a period of political anarchy in Israel's history when "every person did what was right in his own eyes", when the two sons of the priest Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were "wicked men; they had no regard for the Lord". People were not listening. God was not speaking. God was silent. Visions were rare. Having left their traditional ways, as the Indonesian boy put it, God was angry with Israel. Maybe God was even sulking.

It's a chilling thought to imagine that God might grant humanity's request for autonomy, that God could honour our insistence that He leave us alone, or that He would stop speaking as a consequence of our not listening. Perhaps God's last,

terrifying word to us might be, "I have answered your prayers and now grant you the horrible freedom you have craved. Since you are so disinterested as not to listen, I will no longer speak. From now on, the only voices you will hear will be your own."

But a single person can make a difference. Samuel proved to be the exception in this story. Dedicated to Yahweh by his mother Hannah at an early age, he "continued to grow in stature and in favour with the Lord and with men". In contrast to the silence that had fallen upon the land, God spoke to him three times as a little boy, and he responded with his famous words, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." In contrast to the priest Eli and his two degenerate sons who flaunted their exploitations in the place of worship, "The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and He let none of his words fall to the ground." The nation recognized him as a prophet who heard from and spoke for Yahweh. Samuel eventually crowned Israel's first king, Saul, but not before warning the nation about the oppression inherent in political power. By himself, Samuel ended the drought of divine silence in Israel, for "Samuel's words came to all Israel".

Perhaps the Indonesian boy was right. If there are "no more words nowadays" from God, if God has "withdrawn the grace of His word", that might have more to do with our human refusal to listen than with any divine reluctance to speak.

The story of the calling of Samuel is replete with irony and foreshadowing. The irony is bitter: Samuel thinks the voice calling him in the night belongs to Eli, but the voice belongs to YHWH, and the message is against Eli and his house. The oracle

of doom for the house of Eli foreshadows the oracles Samuel delivers over the course of his life.

As the first prophet of ancient Israel in the period of the monarchy, Samuel exposes the threat of monarchs who are concerned with their own security and wealth rather than the well-being of their people. He calls out against ruling families, foretelling not only the end of the leadership of Eli and his sons but also the end of Saul's kingship.

The tendency of the powerful to take advantage of the vulnerable is a chief concern of Samuel. When the people cry out for a king later in this book, Samuel warns them against kings, who seek after their own good more than the collective good of their people. A king "will take the best" from his people and use it for his own betterment. The ideal ruler of the people rules seeking only the good of the people and reflects the concern of YHWH for the poor and powerless.

1 Samuel depicts the origins of the monarchy in ancient Israel and begins with the song of Hannah. Hannah sings of the character of YHWH, a god who breaks "the bows of the mighty" and yet girds "the feeble" with strength. This same God fills up the hungry and "raises up the poor from the dust". Just as the call of Samuel sets the tone for his prophetic career and foreshadows the oracles he will deliver against the human leaders of the people, the song of Hannah represents the central focus of YHWH's leadership of the people: concern for the poor and powerless, and judgment of those who prey on the vulnerable and abuse their power, just as Mary's

Magnificat did in Luke's Gospel.

Even though our form of government is different, Samuel's message and the message of his mother, are still, sadly, pertinent. The poor and powerless are still at the mercy of the strong. Human appetite still destroys lives and livelihood. The task of the church is twofold: (1) to cry out against injustice and the abuse of power in the world, and (2) to hear and respond with humility to the message of judgment that challenges our own practices.

There are several lessons in this story. The first is the ease with which we may miss God's call or attribute it to someone else. Most people who speak of their call do not describe a major disruption in their lives. There are few Damascus Road experiences. Instead, they speak of a quiet, slow awakening to something, be that a life of a particular office in the church, an injustice that needs to be addressed, or a task that needs attention. Like Samuel, they often tell of a period of uncertainty about exactly what and why God is calling them. In addition, Samuel needed Eli to help him understand his call. It often takes others in our lives to aid us in understanding the call that God places before us. Part of our community of faith is to aid each other to see and live out our individual callings from God.

A second lesson concerns Samuel as the outsider. Eli's sons are from the priestly line, and it is their birthright to serve in the Temple. Yet, they have not acted justly and have used their position for gain instead of service to God. Throughout the Bible, God does not always choose the expected ones. Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and

David were all unlikely choices. Jesus calls fishermen and labourers to serve as disciples instead of the priests and prophets of Jerusalem. Position in the church or community is not a guarantee in God's world. All, even outsiders, can be, and are, given tasks in God's kingdom.

God has no interest in the ways we humans order the world. The prophet Joel notes, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters will prophesy; your old men shall dream dreams; and your young men shall see visions; even on your male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." God calls all, even the unexpected.

The third point continues one of the themes from the wilderness. Just as moving into the promised land did not guarantee a perfect life, neither does God's call to serve. God's words to Samuel were hard to hear and even harder to tell to his mentor. Samuel's first act of his call is to tell God's word to Eli and that word involved judgment against Eli's own children. Like Samuel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, God's call often involves working to change human systems that are broken, and this can lead down difficult paths.

God's call comes when we least expect it and often to those we least expect. God is always the God of surprises. We, as the church, need to be like Eli, encouraging all to hear the voice that calls them to be all that they were created to be. At the same time, we help each other to tell the truth even when the truth is hard to hear. We need to remember we follow one who is always turning our human

systems upside down!

There are many voices competing for our attention and how many of us can say that we really know God well enough to recognize a word as being from God or someone else? There is one thing we can know, however. God has no tolerance for those who prey on the weak, who abuse their power, or who eat their fill while others are hungry. Perhaps the difficulty of this message is how easily it can apply to us. Are we in the position of Eli or, worse, his sons, eating our fill and denying both God and our neighbours their fair share, denying God's children justice and love? Whose voice do we listen to?

Amen.