

January 17 2021 [St. Andrew's, PEPC]

Old Testament: 1 Samuel 3:1-20

The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.

² One night, Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. ³ The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. ⁴ Then the Lord called Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am." ⁵ And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

⁶ Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

⁸ A third time the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. ⁹ So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

¹¹ And the Lord said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. ¹² At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. ¹³ For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. ¹⁴ Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.'"

¹⁵ Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the Lord. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, ¹⁶ but Eli called him and said, "Samuel, my son."

Samuel answered, "Here I am."

¹⁷ "What was it he said to you?" Eli asked. "Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you." ¹⁸ So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, "He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes."

¹⁹ The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. ²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord.

Sermon: "Night Light"

Throughout Scripture, there's a scattering of these very special stories,
where God seeks out one particular person
at a particular moment in their lives
to take on a special task
to further God's saving work among his people.

Many of the great Old Testament figures
 – Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah –
 they have one of these one-on-one conversations with God;
 in the new Testament, Jesus calls his disciples this way, too,
 and the apostle Paul had a very personal encounter
 with Jesus too,
 on the road to Damascus,
 well after Jesus' ascension.

But Samuel's experience with God is extra special,
 and not just because it's a perfect excuse to sing the wonderful hymn,
 "I, the Lord of Sea and Sky!"
 It's the way the story is told,
 with so much detail and humour and poignancy.

Flip the page back in 1 Samuel,
 and we can read about his mother, Hannah,
 full of despair and praying passionately for a son.
 And now we meet that son,
 on what seems to be a very ordinary night,
 in the wee hours before dawn,
 while he's sleeping peacefully
 next to the ark of the covenant.

It's easy to imagine the dark inner chamber,
 lit only by a single lamp,
 with perhaps a blanket or cot for Samuel to sleep on.

And then we have this really kind of funny scene,
 where Samuel keeps hearing his name,
 running to the high priest, Eli,
 waking the old man up,
 only to be told to go back to sleep.
 Again and Again.

Until finally Eli works out,
 through his sleep-fogged brain,
 that if it isn't him calling Samuel,
 maybe – just maybe – it's God.
 And that would be something,
 since God's word had become
 a rare and precious thing
 in those dark days.

Finally, Samuel gets it right,
and God appears and speaks to him,
gifting him with this vocation of being a prophet,
tasked with sharing the powerful, life-changing words of God
with God's people.

And it ends with what is one of the best verses in the Bible:
"The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up,
and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground."

That's exactly what we all long for, don't you think,
as followers of God who try to live and speak our faith
and grow in our faith?
To have the Lord right there with us *as* we grow,
and to have our witness as Christians
be meaningful and impactful in our communities
and in the lives of those who know us.

It's a great opening to Samuel's life as a prophet,
and even without knowing or remembering exactly what it was Samuel did,
the fact that there's a 1st AND 2nd Samuel
suggests he did a lot
and that it was worth recording
every bit of it in the Bible.

But if we can quiet the upswell of "I, the Lord of sea and sky" playing in our minds
just for now
and take a slower, closer look at this passage of Scripture,
there are a few troubling points,
a few questions that need to be asked and answered.

Did you notice that Samuel's first prophetic task
– the first words that God speaks through Samuel –
those words are a pretty brutal condemnation of Eli,
the elderly priest who is seemingly Samuel's mentor,
or at least his boss.

When we think of God speaking to us,
we expect there to be some good news in there, don't we?
A bit of hope or a promise for us to latch onto,
an expression of love or care or protection.

Moses was tasked with freeing God's people from slavery;
one of the most-quoted verses from Jeremiah's prophecies

is about how God has a plan for us,
 for hope and a prosperous future.
 One of Jesus' first statements of his task,
 as God's Son,
 was a quote from the prophet Isaiah
 about being sent
 to proclaim freedom, healing
 and wholeness.

That's what we expect to hear when God speaks.
 Not this unequivocal judgement against his own high priest.
 Where is the good news in this first Word from God
 through his young prophet, Samuel?

And why is Eli so accepting of this judgement?
 Perhaps it's a demonstration of how faithful Eli is,
 to simply accept the end of his family because
 "He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes."

But the biggest question in this entire passage
 is the question that the very first verse demands that we ask:
 why, In those days, was the word of the Lord so rare?
 Why had God gone silent?

In 1 Samuel, at least, the blame for that is largely laid
 at the feet of one man: Eli the priest.

All we see of him in what we read today is an old man,
 with dim eyesight but one sharp insight,
 able to tell Samuel who was speaking and that he ought to listen.

Elsewhere, though, well, Eli is a terrible leader.
 He is meant to be the leading prophet and priest of God's people,
 but he never hears directly from God himself.
 When Samuel's mother Hannah is praying passionately
 under her breath for a son,
 Eli mistakes it for drunkenness
 and gives her a hard time,
 rather than recognising
 a deeply-felt plea to God.

But Eli's worst failing was that he did not control his sons,
 who were lower-ranked priests.

Hophni and Phinehas stole the best portions of the sacrifices
that people brought to God for themselves,
and then behaved abusively toward any worshipper
who tried to call them on it or correct them.

And if behaving in such an offensive and greedy way was not enough,
they also sexually abused and assaulted
the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent
where worship took place.
They were priests;
no one was going to argue with them
for fear of offending the God
they supposedly represented.

And instead of controlling his sons
and protecting God's people from their abuse,
Eli...did nothing.
He simply sat on his priestly throne and refused to see.

Through an unnamed man of God,
we read that God had already tried to warn Eli to change his ways...
...but again, Eli did nothing.
His resigned response to God's judgement
upon him and his sons says
at least one positive thing about Eli's character:
he is not an evil, ungodly man;
but he is morally weak and apathetic.

And that means that Samuel's first prophetic task,
those brutal words from God,
it was good news,
in the same way the Moses' task of liberating Israel was,
that Jeremiah's promise of hope and a future was,
the same way that Christ's own proclamation
of freedom from oppression,
sight for the blind,
and wholeness of life for all was.

It's good news because in removing Eli and his awful sons
from their inherited positions of religious leadership
the terrible abuses will end;
worship and ritual practices will be restored and made holy,
as they re-center on God;

and the new religious leader of God's people
 – Samuel –
 will be someone who has the ability
 and the courage
 to listen to God's word and share that word
 with God's people.

And perhaps now, we have an answer to that most worrisome question of all:
 why God had gone silent.

1 Samuel 3 has some really evocative literary touches
 that suggest God's people and priests
 were in spiritual darkness;
 it is night-time,
 the darkest pre-dawn hours;
 Eli the high priest's eyes were failing,
 not able to see much
 in the low light.

We know that it's quite late
 – or very, very early –
 because the lamp of God still burned.
 But all else in the gathering tents of God's people
 was dark and dim.

God hadn't gone away or gone silent at all;
 but the people who were tasked with listening
 couldn't see or hear him anymore...
 ...or maybe they didn't want to.

We can imagine that Eli's sons
 wouldn't have cared what God had to say, either way;
 we know that Eli did care,
 but lacked the will to do much about it.
 Samuel, though,
 was willing to listen and to act;
 to go where God led him to go,
 to say and do and be the prophet
 that God's people needed
 as they began
 a new phase of their communal life:
 the establishment of the line of kings,
 from Saul to David to Jesus.
 The Lord was with Samuel all the way,
 and not one of Samuel's words fell to the ground.

So now we have all the answers to our questions:
 Samuel's first prophetic task is to deliver a message to Eli
 sounds like bad news
 but is really incredibly good news,
 because it means that
 corruption, abuse and apathy
 will no longer have any power or place
 among the leaders of God's people.

Eli accepted God's judgement against him
 in one lone, last act of humility and self-awareness;
 because Eli was morally weak
 and an ineffective, spineless leader...but not truly bad.

And God's word was rare not because God had gone silent,
 but because the people who should have been listening
 couldn't or didn't care
 to hear him anymore.

If we're to stay true to the heart of this Scripture passage,
 then we have to understand it as a call story,
 both to Samuel and through Samuel, to all God's people.

God's people were in a mess,
 right at the bottom of a downward spiral
 that we can read about in the book of Judges.
 But that mess was not because
 God had stopped speaking good news to them;
 it wasn't because God
 was overly picky and judgemental
 towards his people...
 ...it definitely wasn't because
 God had stopped speaking to them
 or had withdrawn from them.
 God stayed present, and himself, through it all.
 But his people didn't.

Our world is in a bit of a mess right now, too;
 although as Christians, I imagine that many of us
 have probably thought that for a while now.
 But we are at an especially low moment,

with the pandemic and all the economic
and emotional and political turmoil
that has unfolded in its wake.

But our messy world is not because God's good news
has become less good or less powerful since it was first proclaimed,
and it's not that God has stopped
having good and hopeful plans for us,
as individuals and as a community of Christians together.

And it's not because God is judging us,
because God is first and foremost a saving God,
who only judges where he intends to save;
and whose great plan is focused on
rescuing and redeeming us,
planting his new life in us even now.

But most of all, our messy, difficult world
is not because God has stopped speaking to us
or turned away from us.
We are still the people God loves,
and this is still his made-good creation.

Back then, all it took to get God's people back on track
was one boy's willingness to listen,
and that was enough for God
to get a foothold again in his people's lives,
to shape a line of kings that eventually led to Jesus.

If the beginning of Samuel's ministry has anything to say to us today,
it's that God still speaks, even in the dark
and God always finds a way
to keep unfolding his plan for us and this world.

If Eli's failed leadership has anything to say to us,
it's that if we confuse *our* unwillingness to listen to God and act
with God being silent,
then we will become as lost and broken,
and as ineffective in our Christian witness as Eli.

God is always calling,
always drawing us into a deeper relationship with him,
but also always calling us to participate
in his saving work for this world.
The first step for God to act in us and through us,

is for us to invite him to speak,
and then listen.
Amen.