

## SAMUEL'S CALL

(02/09/2020)

Scripture Lesson: 1Samuel 3:1-20

*“Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’”* (1 Samuel 3:10)

Last week, in our reflections on the theme of listening, we read a passage from the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of 1 Samuel, the account of how the boy Samuel heard God calling his name. As I was reading the passage during worship, I had the feeling that we needed to return to it again, that there was more to this passage than I was able to cover in my communion meditation. So, this morning, we are turning once again to that passage.

First and Second Samuel are among the books of the Bible that we have not studied in the twenty-two years that I have been leading Sunday morning Bible study. It is a poorly kept secret that I prefer to focus in our Bible study and in my sermons on the teachings of Jesus. I am just not a big fan of most of the writings of the Old Testament.

In addition to not being particularly interested in history and geography, I am not a big fan of the tribal warrior God that we find in the Old Testament. It seems to me that this God, or this particular archetypal image of the Divine, demands absolute obedience, seeks to regulate every single area of human life, demands perfection, severely punishes individuation, and wages war against the feminine experience of the Divine, the Great Mother goddess that was worshipped for hundreds of thousands of years before the patriarchal god Yahweh emerged into consciousness. I am not convinced that the God whom Jesus incarnated is the same God, the same archetypal image of the Divine, the same archetypal energy as that which was experienced in Yahweh. I take some comfort in recalling that the Gnostics, who were repressed and persecuted by the early church, agree with me in this.

Despite my general misgivings about the Old Testament, the story of Samuel is an interesting story. It tells us something about God, and it tells us something about ourselves. It speaks to the matter of call, which I find appropriate on the fifty-first anniversary of my ordination to the Christian ministry.

The two books, 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel, contain a lot of biblical history. The prophet Samuel was an important part of this history; it was Samuel who anointed Saul

and David as the first and second kings of Israel. The story of Samuel is a powerful articulation of an unexpected and almost unrecognized call.

Around 1000 BCE, near the end of the era of the Judges and just before the period of the monarchy, a man named Elkanah lived in the little town of Ramah. Elkanah had two wives. Peninnah bore him several children; Hannah was unable to conceive. Just as Hagar had looked down on Sarah when Sarah was unable to bear children to Abraham, Peninnah ridiculed and tormented Hannah for her inadequacy as a woman.

In that time and culture, the inability to bear children was regarded as a curse. It is interesting that the Bible tells us that “the Lord had closed Hannah’s womb.” I wonder why God would do that. Since having children was regarded as a woman’s primary meaning in life, Hannah felt disgraced. Even if God were doing this to make a point, as he did with Sarah, who gave birth late in life to Isaac, it was not a sensitive thing to do.

Every year Elkanah took his household to the city of Shiloh to worship and offer sacrifice. Eli was the priest of the temple in Shiloh. Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas served as priests because their father was advanced in years. The RSV tells us that the sons of Eli were “worthless men.” The NRSV describes them as “scoundrels.” They had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people. They stole the best part of the sacrifices that were offered by the people at the temple.

This part of the story gives us pause. We note that the clergy throughout history have not always been faithful to their trust. Their ministry has too often been self-serving rather than in the service of their people or the Lord. Eli knows full well that his sons are betraying their trust. He rebukes them, but scripture tells us “they would not listen to the voice of their father.” Once again, it has always been thus.

The Lord passes judgment on Eli’s sons and curses Eli’s family line. There are several points in this narrative where God appears (by our standards) to be unjust. This is why I am not a big fan of Yahweh. God curses Eli even though Eli is a good priest who serves faithfully as Samuel’s mentor. In addition, Eli is the one who makes Samuel aware that it is God who is speaking to him. It seems a little unfair to blame Eli for the sins of his sons, especially when Eli had rebuked them for their bad behavior.

It is ironic that Samuel is the one who delivers the news of God's judgment to Eli, because Samuel's sons later betray their trust in the exact same way that Eli's sons did; instead of serving their people they seek personal gain. In 1 Samuel 8:1-3 we read,

*When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. Yet his sons did not follow in his ways but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.*

On one of their trips to Shiloh, Hannah, who is described (not without just cause) as "bitter in her soul," goes into the temple, prays to the Lord, weeps, and makes a vow:

*O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head. (1 Sam. 1:11)*

A nazirite is one who is set apart, separated, or consecrated for a special purpose--in this case to become a priest. It is interesting that in those days the priests wore their hair long and could drink neither wine nor scotch. Clergy in those days had it really tough!

Eli overhears Hannah's vow. He tells her that he hopes the Lord will grant her petition. And so it happens. Scripture tells us that the Lord "remembered Hannah." This implies that God at times had a memory problem. Hannah becomes pregnant and bears a son. She names him Samuel because, as she says, "I asked him of the Lord."

When Samuel is old enough to be weaned, Hannah takes him to Shiloh and brings him to Eli the priest. Hannah says to Eli,

*Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore, I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.*

Hannah believes in the power of prayer. When God grants her petition, she is overjoyed. In response, she offers the child to the Lord. She entrusts him to Eli that Eli might raise him to be a priest. Actually, in both the RSV and the NRSV we are told that Hannah "loaned" her child to the Lord. I guess a mother never really gives her child away, not in marriage, and not even when the child enters the priesthood.

I think there is another lesson here. Hannah loves her child. When she brings the child to the temple, the child is still young. Hannah loves Samuel, but she does not try to hold onto him. She knows that children are a gift from God, and that, ultimately, they

belong to God. She then prays a magnificent prayer of thanksgiving, not dissimilar in style or content to the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise. The Lord responds to Hannah's faith by giving her five more children: two sons and three daughters.

Samuel lives in the temple with Eli where he learns to "minister before the Lord." Hannah visits Samuel every year. Every year she makes him a little robe and takes it with her when the family makes its annual pilgrimage to Shiloh. Scripture tells us "the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men."

As we begin this morning's lesson, we read that "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."

Samuel's time is not unlike our time. Many people in our time do not have a sense that God is speaking to them. With some of those who do, and who thus presume to speak for God, I have my doubts. This text also reminds us that in biblical times people believed that God speaks to us through our dreams. Dreams, in the words of the Jungian psychoanalyst John Sanford, are "God's forgotten language."

God does speak to us. God speaks to us through the Bible, the church, and through nature. God speaks to us in Jesus, the Word made flesh. God speaks to us and to our time through special people. But God also speaks to each of us as individuals through our dreams. In our dreams, as in our prayer, if we listen carefully, we might hear that "still small voice" that calls us forth into new life.

God speaks to Samuel in the dead of night, so Samuel's experience or vision is what we would probably call a dream. He calls him forth into his vocation as a prophet. Samuel hears, but he does not understand that it is God who is speaking to him. He thinks that the voice he hears is Eli's.

Three times Samuel hears a voice calling his name. Three times he awakens, arises, goes to Eli and asks Eli what he wants. Three times Eli tells him that it was not he who called his name. He tells Samuel to go back to sleep. Finally, Eli realizes what is happening. He tells Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" When Samuel does this, God speaks to him. God tells Samuel what is to happen to Eli's family line because of the evil acts of Eli's sons.

Why didn't Samuel know that it was God who was speaking to him? Why don't we know when God is speaking to us? It may be that we're not listening. It may be that

we are listening to the wrong things. It also may be that God is speaking to us, but we don't understand that it is actually God who is calling our name.

There is another passage in this story that I find interesting. Samuel is described as ministering to the Lord. He is working in the temple. He helps people with their offerings and sacrifices. He performs religious rituals. Yet we are told, "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him."

There is a lesson here. This passage tells us that it is possible for an ordained clergyperson to be involved in ministry, to serve the church, and yet "not know the Lord." It is possible for a lay person to be a part of a Christian church and "not know the Lord." You can hold membership in a church. You can attend worship, sing in the choir, serve on a committee, support our church financially, and help out with the coffee hours. You can do all this--and still not know the Lord.

If we have substituted church membership, church attendance, or church activities for a direct personal knowledge of the Lord, then we have missed the more important part. If we have the right religious beliefs, orthodox religious beliefs, and do not have a personal relationship with Jesus, we have missed the point. We are like Martha, who works hard but misses out on what Jesus calls "the better part," the part chosen by Mary.

If this is true of us, then Samuel has something important to teach us. Samuel would tell us that he was exactly where we are--very active in the "church," but not really knowing the Lord, not really hearing the word of the Lord when it is spoken to him. Samuel would tell us to listen. He would tell us to listen carefully.

At least Samuel places himself in a setting where he is more apt to hear the Lord's voice. He places himself in the temple. He sleeps in the temple. I do not recommend this--it gets cold in here at night! I am also not suggesting that you sleep through my sermon in the hope that God might speak to you, as he did to Samuel, in a dream.

Samuel would tell us that if we do not attend worship, how could God speak to us through worship? If we never set time aside for prayer, how can God speak to us through prayer? If we don't listen, how are we going to hear God's voice?

Most of us are not good listeners. We need to listen more empathically to each other. We need to listen more sensitively to ourselves. And we need to listen carefully

that we might hear that still small voice, the voice of God that is calling our name, the voice that is calling us forth into new life.

Eli asks Samuel to tell him what the Lord had said. Because an angel had already come to Eli and had warned him, I suspect that Eli knew what God had said to Samuel. But Eli wanted Samuel to tell him the truth. He wanted to hear what he really didn't want to hear.

We want to hear God's voice when God is comforting us, when God is confirming us, when God is praising us. We do not always want to hear God's voice when God is judging us or challenging us. I think Eli had a lot of courage and a lot of integrity to want to hear the truth--even when the truth hurt.

When Samuel realizes that it is God who is speaking to him, he does not run away as Jonah did. He asks God to speak to him once more, and he promises to listen. Prior to this epiphany, Samuel was an active member of his church. When Samuel opens himself to God, when he listens, his relationship with God moves from religious observance to a deep personal experience. He discovers what it means to "know the Lord."

Samuel would tell us that God spoke to people in biblical times, but that God is still speaking. He spoke to the prophets of old, and he speaks to us today. He speaks to us as a people and he speaks to each and every one of us as an individual. When we listen to what God is saying to us, we open ourselves to inner transformation, and we become more able to incarnate the kingdom of God in our little corner of the world.

Samuel would tell us that if we are to know the Lord, we have to begin by listening. If we listen carefully, if we listen not only through our ears but through our heart, we might hear God's voice calling our name. We might hear God's voice calling us, calling our nation, and calling our world forth into fullness of life.

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