

“God Provides Clarity”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 17, 2021

21st Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 25:4-10

Rev. John Wahl

I Samuel 3:1-21

Well...so much for Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth; after spending two weeks in readings from the book of Exodus, we are now jumping right to First Samuel. The wilderness lessons are over and the people have settled into the land promised long ago to Abraham. After Moses and Joshua, the Israelites are led by a series of judges who rise up during difficult times. A shrine was built in Shiloh to house the ark of the covenant, and a seer was there – not exactly a prophet, not exactly a judge, but someone to help lead worship and interpret God’s word to the people – his name was Eli. After his own sons had grown, he became a mentor to a child, Samuel, whose mother, Hannah, had dedicated in service to God.

Samuel is growing up in a precarious time when “when word of the Lord was rare” – a word that means precious: like silver or gold – and that “visions weren’t widely known.” Shiloh, the place of divine presence, had become defiled by the abusive and greedy actions of Eli’s sons and by Eli’s inability to convince them to reform their ways.

Eli is aged, both physically and emotionally; his eyesight has grown dim. It’s also possible that Eli felt ill-prepared for this task of raising Samuel. Eli’s own sons were corrupt and he didn’t know how to set them straight.

Eli is old; he had lost his sight. So, when Samuel appears at his bedside, it takes three tries before reality broke through. Perhaps, Eli may have thought Samuel was too young, too inexperienced, unprepared, or maybe just naïve. Perhaps Eli was so used to doing things on his own – by rote – that it did not occur to him that God could still speak. Maybe he was just tired. Whatever the case, he was blinded: whether by his assumptions, his fear, or his apathy.

God’s call to Samuel comes as a voice in the middle of the night. Three times Samuel mistook God’s voice for Eli’s voice. Eventually, Eli helps Samuel

realize it was God calling and instructs him to answer God's call. Samuel doesn't object; doesn't resist; he simply goes back to his resting place in God's house to listen.

Eli's eyes had grown weak, but he was the seer: he was supposed to recognize God; and so, while his own abilities to listen and see may be faltering, he plays a role in helping the next generation – even if it is not his own children – take up that mantle of leadership. Thus, through the collaboration of mentor and student, elder and child, the word of the Lord – so precious and rare – would become known once again. This can only happen because Eli, the elder, both teaches and learns from Samuel, the younger.

Often, when the word of the Lord shows up in a community, it's the young people who hear and take it seriously, and who then see how things need to be change. Think of the Civil Rights era where leaders in their twenties like Martin Luther King and John Lewis stepped to the front to lead the movement. Young people can hear with fresh ears and believe that we are actively striving for the kingdom of God: God's vision of an alternate way to what this world offers and demands. They believe in the possible; rather than just accepting the way things are, young people – like Samuel – insist on taking the word of the Lord seriously.

Sometimes, though, it can be hard for older people to listen. Like Eli, our vision grows dim and we become tired or comfortable with how things are. We like that religious institutions are set up to meet our needs. And, if we're willing to be honest, we don't want to admit that the way we've always done things has created the results we now see: where generations of young people realize that even if we talk about it, we really didn't intend to change our lives based on what we've taught. As a result, many have left the church to find causes or groups that better put into practice the words of change we have spoken.

Young Samuel's answer, when he's called by God, is: "Here I am" – that same response that we've repeatedly heard in this autumn's readings: from Abraham to Moses. Remember, it means more than just "I'm here," it also means I am fully present and committed, ready to do whatever you ask. That's what Samuel says to Eli, over and over, in the night: "Here I am," I'm committed, I'm all-in.¹

That's what I so often hear our young people saying to us; whether on mission trips or at youth conferences; inside the church or beyond its walls.

¹ Teri Peterson, "A Sermon on the Call of Samuel"

Because of the relationships we have created with them, they trust that we – the people who promised at their baptisms to bring them up to know and love Christ and his church, to pray for them and teach them, to walk alongside them on this journey of faith – are also saying “Here I am” to them; that we are fully present, committed, all-in. When we say “Here I am” to each other across the generations, we commit ourselves to a relationship of teaching and learning, listening and speaking.

And even though Eli knows – for God has already told him – that God is not pleased with the way things have been going at the shrine of Shiloh; that God does not approve of the perverse actions of Eli’s sons and Eli’s inability to set them straight; even though Eli knows this, he is still willing to listen and learn from Samuel. And he also knows that for Samuel to be able to truly listen and respond to God’s calling, he must mentor and teach Samuel how to use his strong, young eyes to become a seer. Eli must pass along his leadership role to his young mentee.

And so, after being awakened by Samuel a third time, he tells the boy to go back and lie down, and – if God calls – to respond, saying, “Speak, your servant is listening.” And then, in the morning, instead of being apathetic or forgetful, Eli calls out to Samuel to tell him everything, to hold nothing back. If the word of God – which was so rare – had been spoken, Eli wanted to hear it; even if – as he supposed – it would not be good news for him. Deep down, Eli probably knew that things needed to change; and he now realized that Samuel, the child, would be God’s chosen instrument to bring that transformation to pass.

Young people want to know whether what we say we believe – and what we teach them to believe – matters to us and how we live. They want to know if our faith makes a difference in our choices: how we spend our time, how we share our resources, how we vote, who we love and accept. They want to know if the Christian faith we teach them gets put into practice when we see things in the world that need to change: that are wrong, unjust, or harm people. They want to hear us say “Here I am” to each other; not just younger to elder, but also elder to younger; and all of us together to God. They want to know that we believe in the possibilities that God is setting out before us; and that we will walk together into the future even if it takes us away from our safe places and comfortable ways.

One of the beautiful messages of this story is that even though Samuel delivers what is bad news to Eli, it does not distance them from one another or destroy their relationship. The old seer recognizes that Samuel is merely the messenger; he is not responsible for making Eli’s life uncomfortable or unpleasant.

The deeds have already been done. What Samuel now provides – through God’s voice and with Eli’s help – is clarity; a way forward out of a precarious time is emerging; and the transition of leadership means God’s word again will be heard in the land.²

This story of God calling Samuel serves as the prelude to a long career that will lead him to anoint and crown Israel’s first kings. We are told that he grows up and becomes a prophet who trusted the word of the Lord as it came to him and spoke with confidence; none of which could have been possible apart from this nurturing relationship with his mentor, Eli.

Sometimes, it seems like we are living in another moment in time when the word of the Lord is rare; that the visions of God’s future aren’t widely known. Our tradition teaches us that God’s call consists of two parts: an inward recognition paired with outward confirmation. May this ancient story encourage us to nurture the kind of relationships what will help to till the soil; so the seeds of compassion, justice, and faithfulness that have been planted can grow. May we encourage, listen to, and mentor young people around us; and may our choices and actions show all generations how Christians have been called to live. Amen.

² Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*