

Epiphany II

I Samuel 3:1-20

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The boy Samuel was just a toddler when his mother Hannah handed him over to the priest Eli, returning the son she had long prayed for back to God, so that he would grow up in the shadow of Israel's worship, tutored in a life of sacred service. Guided by the priest Eli, Samuel learns how to live at the temple, which at this point in Israel's history is not a building but a tabernacle, a huge tent of meeting where the divine and holy touch. We can imagine a growing boy, gaining skills at lighting candles, welcoming worshipers, preparing the day's sacrifices or sweeping up the burnt ashes. On this night he is sleeping deep inside the tent next to the ark of God, understood to symbolize God's presence amongst God's people. Samuel watches the light, ensuring the flame does not go out during the hours between dusk and dawn. One preacher characterized Samuel's sleeping space as akin to rolling out a sleeping bag in a graveyard or alongside a volcano. If you have ever wandered an unlit church at midnight you recognize the mixture of awe and dread that comes with feeling unusually close to the Force that sparks the universe.

Samuel has taken this place by the ark in part because Eli's sons have failed to uphold their duties as caretakers of the temple. Scripture tells of their wickedness. The sons have pre-empted the sacrifice of animal meat at the altar, snatching away the choice pieces before the full burning. They have preyed upon the women who serve at the tent's entrance. They are, says the text, scoundrels. Eli knows of his sons' misdeeds and chastises their behavior, but his works are ineffectual and their cruel blasphemy continues. Hear the despair that seeps through the scene's descriptions. The word of the Lord was rare in those days. Visions were not common. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, but the wick is steadily burning downward. When God calls out "Samuel," the boy assumes it is the old man needing his nightly assistance. Samuel runs to Eli's side three times before the priest intuits who is calling. Even Eli, in his old age and disappointment, sees the glimmer of hope contained in God's voice speaking.

A multitude of voices cry out to us daily, seeking our attention. Advertisements, talk radio, 24-hour news networks, and podcasts galore. There is also, as Theodore Wardlaw notes, the internal critic inside of us, the voice of a parent long deceased or a teacher who noted our inadequacies. Such voices endure whatever our advancing age. To listen for the calling voice of God, concludes Wardlaw, is not as easy as it sounds.¹ We may be disinclined to identify the nighttime calling as an intimate invitation from the voice that shaped the universe. Another preacher, Debi Thomas, notes how scared she was as a child of nighttime sounds. Such creaking would send her scurrying to her parents' bedroom for comfort. These days, she continues, "if I hear a voice in the night, I probably won't call my parents but I will question my

¹ Wardlaw, Theodore, "Notes from our Forebearers: The Calling Voice" in *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. 26 No. 2, Lent 2003, 48-53.

sanity. I'd cut back on caffeine. I would sign up for yoga. I'd probably do everything but believe God is talking to me."²

This night the voice persisted. God's calling persisted. With the help of Eli, whose leadership is diminished but not destroyed, Samuel is able to stay put there by the light and the ark manifesting God's faithfulness, in order to receive God's message. Among the sons' corruption, amid the despairingly long silence, into the dimming light, God speaks. Samuel. Samuel. God keeps calling until Samuel learns how to listen. If ever we are tempted to write off God's involvement in human chaos, remember Samuel, roused from sleep to hear God's voice. The spotlight of the story is not Samuel's receptivity but God's persistence. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr, "The God whom we worship is not a weak and incompetent God. The ringing testimony of the Christian faith is that God is able."

Often, too often, sermons based on I Samuel 3 stop at verse 10; keeping the focus on Samuel's reply to this nighttime voice. We turn the spotlight upon ourselves, focusing on the thrill and the trepidation of answering, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." It is a great place to emphasize. A rich message lies here. But the third chapter of Samuel does not end at verse ten. Whatever hope we take in the reality that God does speak must be grounded in what God says. And here, God speaks judgment. God justly critiques and delivers consequences for the evil of Eli's sons and the failure of the father to restrain them. The newness God is doing begins in the judgment of the present moment.

Too often we collapse the call of God into what is cheerful, inspiring and capable of accumulating accolades for us. The heroes of our faith witness otherwise. They demonstrate the courage to speak uncomfortable truths and the unpopularity such truth-telling can bring. They show us the pain of struggling toward justice when it appears evil is triumphing. They embody the loneliness that can result from loyalty to God above all else. We celebrate one such hero tomorrow. Imagine Samuel, awake all night, wondering how he is going to tell his father in faith that God is casting judgment on his household's betrayal of its calling. Eli receives the message without protest. He even affirms it as from God. Living through our own days of crisis, we receive from scripture a story about the inauguration of a prophet. Scripture reminds us that God is still speaking, still calling out to God's people, calling until we learn how to listen and offering a message, which, even in its honest judgment, releases us toward a better future.

What truths can we claim from the story of Samuel? The light may appear dim, but God's light never goes out. Truth one. God is forever calling forth followers, equipped us with courage and a message for this present moment. Truth two. In those moments when the word from God is judgment, the conversation requires partners - both Samuel, the younger, and Eli, the older, participate here - in order to work its newness. Each has a role to place. Each must yield in their own way to God's movement. We are never talking only to ourselves, always in conversation with our brothers and sisters. Truth three. And finally, from such calling voices and judgment rendered, something new is born. Here is the hope of new life forged from the upheaval because God is able, God is faithful, and God is calling us to be a part of the new thing God is doing. Amen.

² Thomas, Debi, "The Outsider Prophet" in *Journey with Jesus: A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church*, January 18 2015. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20150112JJ.shtml>. Accessed January 14, 2021.