

A Time When the Word of the Lord Was Rare
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Scriptures:

1 Samuel 3:1-10 (NRSV)

1 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. 3 the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down within the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

4 Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!"

7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

8 And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy.

9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for thy servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 And the LORD came and stood forth, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for thy servant hears."

Sermon:

All too often, when we hear about Samuel's call, we do so without a lot of background information, especially considering what God initially called Samuel to do. So, let me give an expanded setting for the story of Samuel's call. Samuel's call comes in an early period in the history of Israel, well before the centralization of its religion in Jerusalem by King David. At the time of our story this morning, the Israelites were just a loose confederation of tribes with presiding priest-judges functioning in their religious life and tribal elders in all other areas.

Samuel, as you may remember, was a divine-gift child of the barren wife, Hannah, of a man named Elkanan. In the culture at this time, a barren woman was generally viewed through the lenses of moral judgement and her inability to conceive as a divine punishment for some sin.

Hannah suffered the protracted shaming and harsh treatment of Elkanan's other more fertile wife. This was made all the worse by the fact that in the culture a woman was not accepted as a member in full standing or of any significance among her husband's people until she gave birth, preferably to a male child.

During one of Elkanan's family's periodic pilgrimages to the sanctuary at Shiloh, Hannah pledged that if the Lord would allow her to have a male child, she would not redeem him as was the custom for the firstborn but dedicate him to the Lord instead. After Samuel's birth, Hannah fulfilled her pledge to the Lord and when the child was about three, she placed him in service to God at Shiloh where Eli was the chief priest and judge. Later we learn that Hannah had three more sons and two daughters.

At the time of the story today, Samuel served as an acolyte-protégé-companion to Eli at Shiloh, and per Josephus, the Jewish historian (*Antiquities V, 10.4*), Samuel was about twelve years old, a young man at the time of his call. At twelve, Samuel was considered a "son of the Law", but he had not experienced what we might say was his own internal voice or definitive sense of God's presence in his life.

The duties of the priest-judges were to offer animal sacrifices to God in a precise and traditional manner, which required burning the fat of an animal as an offering to God before

boiling the remainder of the flesh, which was then divided between the person making the offering and the officiating priest or priests. The priests were to maintain the physical aspects of the sanctuary or place of offering; wear the ephod or breast plate, a symbol of the priestly office, which also contained the devices used for divining God's will in particular situations. The priests were also responsible for carrying the standard of the Lord into battle.

The undercurrent in this morning's scriptures, as we learn in verses 1 and 2, was a time when the "Word of the Lord" was rare and there were no frequent visions or directions from God. The Word of the Lord here should be understood as the immediate and guiding presence of the Lord in the affairs of the people that usually came through the voices of the priest-judges. We get the idea that the rarity of the Word of the Lord was because Eli and his sons were not worthy conduits through whom God could and would speak. It was also a time when the Israelite tribes were constantly harassed by the Philistines and in dire need of divine guidance and protection - a Word from the Lord, if you will.

The now old and infirmed priest Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were called "worthless men" and "scoundrels" who did not have an intimate relationship with the Lord. (1 Sam. 2:12) These two men committed grievous sins against the people and against God. They would take the portions of the sacrifices that were supposed to be offered to God, especially meat with the fat, and either retrieve it from the pot before it was cooked or demand raw meat, so they could roast it for themselves. Some scholars believe that later redactors added a salacious dimension to these worthless young men's activities by saying they took advantage of their positions to sexually exploit some of the female attendants in the temple. Nothing spices up a story and makes it more compelling than a little prurient activity on the part of the bad guys. Eli's sons also threatened people with violence if they complained or told on them. (*Talk about the preacher's kids from hell.*)

Eli heard about his sons' behaviors and admonished them, but he was too old to be forceful and bring them in line or dismiss them as priests. Eli told his sons that if they sinned against the people, they could be forgiven, and things could be made right because God could intercede for them. However, if a person willfully and knowingly sinned, that is, dishonored God, and was unrepentant, there was no one to intercede for them. These "sons of Belial" or sons of corruption didn't listen. Moreover, it seems that the general populace was reluctant to get too deeply involved. We are not told whether this reluctance was out of respect for Eli or people did not want to tamper with tribal cohesion at the time.

In 1 Samuel 2:27, we hear about a lone person from God (*we are not told who this person is*) that has confronted Eli concerning his sons' sins and crimes against God and the people. The divine judgment against Eli for abdicating his responsibilities as parent and priest was that none of Eli's descendants, beyond his currently serving sons, would function as priests before the Lord ever again. The rest of Eli's family would have a challenging time in the future. They would come to the point where they would beg for the job of serving the Lord just for a part of the sacrifice for food. As a sign of the truth of God's judgment on the house of Eli, both of Eli's sons would die on the same day.

I remind us that in this period in Israel's history, a person's sense of immortality lay in their male heirs and in their honorable memories among their children and the people or tribe. In short, God's judgment on Eli and his sons assured them of a dishonorable memory among their children and the tribe. In addition, the prophet says that God has chosen someone else to be a priest before God, and this person will always honor God.

As the story goes, it is early in the morning because the lamp at the Arc of the Covenant that was supposed to burn from sunset to sunrise has not gone out. Young Samuel sleeps near the Arc, tends the lamp, etc. Samuel hears someone calling him. Most translations at this point

tell us that it was the voice of the Lord calling; however, the earliest texts will not support this. People understood there were many sources of "voices" that could contact a person. Samuel thinks it is old Eli calling him for assistance; therefore, Samuel is not dreaming when he hears the voice. Because the word of the Lord was so rare in the land and, as I said, young Samuel had not become aware of his own internal voice of God, he was sure it was Eli calling him. After the third call, Eli instructs Samuel to respond to the voice. The voice speaks and now Samuel has a vision and in the vision Samuel sees or understands that the words of that unnamed "Man of God" are about to come true.

Samuel's first duty as a prophet was to speak forth the doom of Eli's family's hereditary priesthood before God. This was all because of a father's unwillingness or inability to censure, discipline, or remove his corrupt and dishonorable sons from office.

God is now going to remove Hophni and Phinehas permanently for their unholy actions. Moreover, Eli will soon suffer the consequences of his lack of parental and professional supervision of his sons. Eli and his sons are about to be destroyed and their names are to become associated with an ignominious defeat of the people of Israel in battle and with the loss of the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines. Eli and his sons will go down to their graves in dishonor and bring disgrace upon their family's name forever, and so it is.

Reluctantly, young Samuel relays this horrible vision to Eli. Eli in profound resignation said, "He is the Lord, and he will do the right thing". (*Holy Bible, Contemporary English Version, ABS*). It is Eli, therefore, who affirms that the voice that Samuel heard was the Word of the Lord and validates the unknown Man of God as a true prophet of the Lord.

Eli didn't plead old age or frailty as excuses for not quality controlling his sons. He didn't try to bargain or to ask God for one more chance to reform his two sons. He just accepted God's judgment as a fait accompli. He knew what was to happen would be in part the result of his actions or inactions and the actions of his sons - so be it.

Later, the Israelites find themselves in a battle with the Philistines. During the first skirmish, the Israelites are routed. The Israelites like so many people throw up their hands and ask, "Why is God doing this to us?" Anyway, the Israelites conclude that their defeat in this first skirmish was due to a lack of the immediate presence of God. So, Hophni and Phinehas were sent back to Shiloh to fetch the Ark of the Covenant, which does not sit well with Eli. (*Does this sound familiar? When human pride and arrogance has messed things up, we often seek God's presence after we have set into motion irreversible affects.*)

The Ark was a holy object, wherein it was believed God's presence dwelled. If the Ark was there, God could surely see the battle and jump into the fray to champion the Israelites as God had done in the past. When Hophni and Phinehas arrive back at camp, the camp erupts in shouts of joy and hope. The Ark rallies the troops' courage.

This noise of jubilation caused the Philistines in their camp to question what was going on. When they learned that a god had come into the Israelite camp, the same god that had delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians, they were frightened. I can only imagine what the Philistine generals told their troops - something like, buck up fellows, take courage, our gods are bigger, "badder," and more powerful than the Israelites and their lone god. Besides, it would be better to die in battle than become slaves of those Israelites. To battle they went. The Philistines won the day, killing a lot of the Israelites, including Eli's two sons. Furthermore, the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines - in effect the god of the Israelites had been defeated and captured.

When word reached Eli that his sons were dead and the Ark of the Covenant had been captured, he was so shocked that he fell over backwards off a stool, broke his neck, and died; thus ending the priesthood of Eli and his sons and their tenure at Shiloh.

The reader is left to understand that all this happened because of several things. One, Eli wouldn't step up to the plate and be a responsible parent and priestly supervisor; secondly, Eli's sons were corrupt priests and would not listen to Eli's corrections or honor God. Thirdly, the people of the land were complicit because they were not responsible in their relationship to God and to one another by calling for and demanding justice and integrity in the priests. Finally, it is made clear that God is the true sovereign of God's people, and God's will and ways must be kept if the people are to be protected, prosper, and be joyful. I imagine people, like now, were just too busy with the affairs of life - marrying, having and raising children, spoiling grandkids, buying and selling things, etc. Folks just didn't want to get involved.

With the death of Eli and his sons, Samuel would eventually assume leadership and become the last of the great judges of Israel before they demand a king like other peoples. Samuel never shied away from representing God to the people or to the leaders, or from being responsive to the word of the Lord all his days.

As a career military person, I can't help but think about all those guys that were killed in the battle in which the Ark was lost. Many would say that it is terrible that God would let all those people die because of the sins of Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas. Well, that is an over simplification of the situation and events that led up to the battle with the Philistines and a bit naïve.

However, I think it is important that we understand that throughout history the not-guilty as well as the innocent have suffered because of the sins of others, especially the sins and caprices of leadership. This is doubly so when corrupt, selfish, and greedy leaders make self-serving choices and are allowed to persist in positions of leadership because of the people's complacency, indifference, or cowardice. In so doing, people allow themselves and their children to become pawns and casualties in the convoluted and corrupt affairs of the powerful and their agendas.

We have seen such things in our own time, haven't we? Regardless of whether we participate in the immoral or unethical conduct or not, if we the people tolerate it; don't speak up and confront it, we give tacit permission for it to continue and to grow. Eventually, the effects of immoral, unethical, and inept conduct compounds and reaches such a point that it violates physical, social, moral, and spiritual laws beyond repair and the consequences roll down on the guilty and innocent alike. That's a fact. One may argue with it; get mad with God about it, but that is a fact of reality just like the Law of Gravity.

Therefore, we must choose behaviors for ourselves and our families that do not violate the physical, moral, and spiritual laws of the universe and demand the same of others, especially our leaders, if we want healthy and wholesome physical, mental, and spiritual lives. Please understand that tolerating sin is to condone it. Furthermore, addressing sinful behaviors is judgment on the behavior, not necessarily pronouncing divine condemnation on the sinner, unless they refuse to repent and change.

We can scream to high heaven that such things aren't fair, God isn't just, or mouth a bunch of convoluted theological rhetoric until hell freezes over, but the fact remains that we are all in this together, so we better pay attention and be responsible for what goes on around us, among us, and within us.

I know that many think and some will say, well that's just the way things are, and I am going to be dead and in heaven long before the full weight of some of my choices and indifference catches up with me, my kids, grandkids, great grandkids, and future generations. Therefore, I don't really care what people in the future will think about me, or how they will remember me because I am going to be whooping it up in heaven.

To such speculations, I say, Whoa! Let's think about that. Such a selfish position has merit only if we believe there is no ongoing connection between this life and the next life beyond a

person either going to heaven or hell. We may escape a judgment of condemnation before God in Christ, but our influences will live on, and just possibly affect our degree of rewards or punishments in the next life. Now how's that for a speculation on something as stupid as I don't care about what happens after I'm gone?

Like young Samuel, I hate it that at times I feel I must pronounce the bad news of judgment, if the people of God don't act responsibly within their own families, within their circle of friends and acquaintances, or do not hold their appointed, elected, and religious officials to high standards of moral and ethical behaviors. If we don't, we will suffer along with Hophni, Phinehas, old Eli, and all those who lost their children, husbands, and fathers in the battle. We and our children and their children will become a part of those nameless, faceless thousands, who have and will suffer and die because of willfully corrupt, incompetent leadership, and indifferent people.

The Good News amid the Bad News is that when the *precious Word of the Lord is not rare in the land*, we will have righteous people and righteous leaders who will have visions of how it can be in the Lord; and they and the people will strive together to make it so. God has promised and proven that God will guide us and our leaders in discerning God's will in prayer, scripture, and people entering into holy dialogue. We have the Holy Spirit to strengthen, aid, equip, and comfort as we go about doing what we know and believe to be right.

However, know this: the innocent and the not-guilty will suffer if we as the unsung prophets of God don't claim the courage of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to confront both great and small, as Jesus did, in order to ensure that the precious word of the Lord is not rare in the land. And, who knows what may or may not catch up with us on the other side of this life?