

Voices and Visions

Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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John 1:43-51, Psalm 139, I Samuel 3:1-10

Our first passage is from the 1st Chapter of John. As you hear it read, listen for what it is that causes Philip's friend Nathaniel to respond to Jesus invitation to become his disciple. *Read John here.*

Our second passage is from the book of Psalms. As we read the first eighteen verses of Psalm 139 responsively, ponder how God knows the Psalmist and you and me fully, intimately. Please join me in reading responsively from the insert. *Read Psalm 139 here.*

In order to put the passage I'm about to read from I Samuel in context, it is important to understand that ancient Israel is in a time of political change, and the young Samuel will play a vital role in that transformation. Samuel will be a transitional figure as Israel moves from being led by various people were known as judges - leaders who arose for a time but did not have the status or authority of kings - to being ruled by kings. Samuel, who is regarded by some as the last judge and the first prophet, will anoint the kings Saul and David. As Bruce Douglass pointed out in his class last week, the biblical record looks on this transition to a monarchy with great ambivalence, but it is what it is.

Samuel, as the story goes, was the answer to his mother Hannah's desperate prayers for a child and as such was dedicated by her to grow up in the temple. After receiving the call of God in today's text, Samuel's first order of business will be to deliver a difficult message from God to Eli, the priest who served as his mentor. Under Eli, the priesthood had become corrupt, as Eli's sons had abused their power. Listen for the way God calls Samuel, and how Eli helps Samuel realize that call. *Read the passage from Samuel here.*

"The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." With these words from I Samuel 3:1, the storyteller pulls us immediately on board. It is a thoroughly modern statement, isn't it? A statement that sums up our discomfort with religious talk among politicians and policy makers... We are in the midst of a time of searching for answers to seemingly insurmountable challenges on all fronts: political, environmental, financial, and social. With everything that once seemed fixed and settled and safe getting shakier by the minute, people are asking, "Where is God in all of this? Why doesn't God do something?" But at the same time there is there is an underlying distrust of anyone claiming to have the answers based on religious conviction or an active prayer life.

Don't get me wrong. I think most people of faith like the idea of having leaders who pray, whether they are political figures or religious figures. But the fact that we can share the same faith and have very different ideas on all kinds of issues, raises the question, "Who knows the mind of God? Who can speak for God? How do we hear God's voice?"

That's the world we are living in these days. In such a world as this, the story of young Samuel and old Eli invites us to consider how God may be speaking and through whom. The political context of the story is a changing political landscape in which the people had grown weary of the old order of things and were pushing for something new. Ever since their entry into the promised land the people of God had been led by a series of men and women known as judges, who had at different times risen up to lead

through difficulty or when enemies threatened their survival. In addition to these leaders there were also the temple priests, who oversaw spiritual and community matters and who led temple worship.

In the days of Eli and Samuel, the people had begun to express dissatisfaction with this status quo. They looked at other nations around them and saw their kings, symbols of stability and power and wealth. They were sure they would be a stronger nation under the leadership of a king. The temple leadership had become corrupt. Eli had not been able to pass his faithfulness on to his sons and their offenses are spelled out in the first two chapters of I Samuel. They took advantage of vulnerable women who came to the temple to worship. They also treated the temple sacrifices with contempt. When people would bring their animals for sacrifice into the temple, the priests would demand that the best parts be given to them...thus, they took what was meant for the Lord and used their status as priests to satisfy their own desires.

Such misuse of power could not be allowed to continue. And the desire for a king was growing more insistent with each passing day. It was time for a new order to emerge from the old status quo. But who would speak the truth of the situation? Who could be heard and trusted by the people?

This is the political and social setting in which the story begins. The writer invites us into the temple, where we find Eli, old, sad, almost blind, and full of regrets, remembering the days when his connection with God had been *right there* and he had held great promise for his sons and their ministry in his footsteps. The story had turned out so differently than what he had imagined all those years before.

But the story was not over. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, the text says. One room over, in the main part of the temple near the Ark of the Covenant, we find young Samuel lying on a mat on the floor. Samuel was a boy who had been dedicated to God's service as an infant. He had been raised in the temple by Eli from the time he was weaned and had served him basically his entire life. He had never known anything else except life in the temple, but he was still quite young and, as the text says, "he did not yet know the Lord."

So when the Lord called to him, Samuel did not know what was happening. When he heard the voice, "*Samuel! Samuel!*" he got up and ran to Eli, saying, "Here I am. For you called me." Eli, of course, sent him back to his mat, saying, "I didn't call you. Go back to bed."

God called a second time. "*Samuel!*" Samuel got up again and ran into Eli. "Here I am. Did you call me?" Again, Eli sent him back to his mat saying, "Son, go back to sleep. I didn't call you."

God called a third time and Samuel disturbed old Eli a third time, "Here I am. For you called me." It was on this third trip that Eli was reminded of the days when the word of the Lord was not rare, the days when he himself had heard that voice loudly and clearly. It's a little bit of a sad commentary, isn't it, that the word of the Lord was unexpected, even in the temple? That Samuel had not been taught to listen for it and expect it? That Eli himself had given up on hearing it? But on this third time, God got the attention of Eli, someone who was able to help Samuel hear and respond to the voice of the Lord, for he himself had heard that voice.

Last weekend we kicked off our annual confirmation process with our eighth graders and last Sunday we commissioned the adults who will serve as their mentors. One of the roles a confirmation mentor plays is to assist a confirmand on the journey of exploring faith and perhaps claiming that faith for himself or herself. Reading this story helps put into perspective the call to be a faith mentor. It is a call to

share one's journey of faith with a young person, to point out how God has been at work in your life. It is also a call to prepare a young person for God's activity in their own lives, and to help them discern how God is speaking to them even now and guiding them even now.

It took both Samuel and Eli to discern God's call and to bear God's words. For when Eli perceived that it was the Lord speaking to Samuel, he said, "go and lie down again. And if he calls this time say, "Lord, speak, for your servant is listening."

Samuel did as he was told and then the Lord spoke to him saying, "*What I am about to do will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. For Eli and his house have sinned against me for too long, and Eli did not stop it, so he too will be punished, and there will be no forgiveness for these many sins that have piled up, not now, not ever.*"

Now that doesn't sound much like the God I have come to know in New Testament texts, but nevertheless that is what the text says. And it says it to provide notice of God's intention to abandon the priestly line of Eli, Samuel's friend and mentor. And after he had heard the words, Samuel just lay there the rest of the night wondering what to do when morning came.

One of the things I love about this story is how Eli helps Samuel be open to God's voice, and then also helps Samuel bear the weight of what God has to say. Let me put it this way. Eli is a lot of things: old, sad, nearly blind, ineffectual as a parent. But he is not in denial. He knows that the word of the Lord will not be a good one for him or the order he has had a part in creating. And I think he knows, too, how these words will affect a young man who has looked up to him and learned from him.

So, very early the next morning, Eli called Samuel to his side. And in an act of kindness and love he said, "Tell me everything. Don't hold anything back." So Samuel told him everything, everything Eli already knew. And Eli said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

What a moment between mentor and student. In just that very small exchange Eli conveyed that he trusted Samuel and that he trusted God. His response indicated that he accepted God's word as revealed to Samuel. His response showed that even though God's word was not always the word you wanted to hear, God's word was to be trusted. His response revealed an inner conviction that whatever plans God had were for the ultimate good of the people.

This moment when Eli acknowledged his trust in God and in Samuel was a defining moment in the life of a young man who would become, as the text says, "a trustworthy prophet of the Lord." Samuel would anoint kings and usher in a new political order for the house of Israel. His ears would tingle again and again as God revealed to him the rise and fall of rulers and as the future was shaped and shared with God's people through the life and words of Samuel.

In every generation God raises up leaders who are able to discern his voice and his message for that age and for their community. Prophets, priests, community leaders, and teachers they arise. Song-writers, poets, scholars, and preachers shape and deliver the word. Politicians and peacemakers allow a grander vision to mold their actions. Some of those servants are remembered for their ability to embrace or effect change. Others speak clearly and gather others to godly causes. Some have suffered for their message but shared it just the same. Which takes us straight to the questions posed by the realization that God speaks in this age and in every age through imperfect people like Eli and Samuel and even people

like you and me: how do you know the voice of the Lord among all the voices clamoring for attention? How do you rightly discern who speaks for God and who is a trustworthy prophet of the Lord?

It's a good question. In the Old Testament there are a number of prophets mentioned who say they speak for God but who actually pay lip service to the throne or speak only what people want to hear. Some religious leaders were indicted by true prophets like Jeremiah for crying "peace, peace," when there was no peace, simply because the positive message lined their pockets or kept them in favor with the community.

Knowing full well that the pressure to say what people want to hear dictates many of the messages we hear on a daily basis, how do we rightly discern the voice of God to our generation? How do we recognize that ear-tingling message that resonates with truth and sets us on the right path toward God's vision of the future?

In exploring that question, I first want to share a story I heard on NPR on Friday evening. The story is about Martin Luther King, Jr. and a trip he took to India in 1959. He spent much of February and March there that year, traveling the country to see for himself the impact of Mahatma Gandhi's message of nonviolent social action. In a taped address to the people of India recently rediscovered by All India Radio Dr. King said, "Mahatma Gandhi may well be God's appeal to this generation. For in a day when Sputniks and Explorers dash through outer space, and guided ballistic missiles carve highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can win a war. Today we no longer have the choice between violence and non-violence. Today the choice we face is either non-violence or non-existence."

Something in Martin Luther King's words rings true, as do the words of the man he so admired, Mahatma Gandhi. It is clear from these examples that God can speak powerfully through the words of ordinary people. But it's not always just that clear, is it? We sometimes find ourselves confused by the competing messages of our day. How, then, are we to know who does and does not speak authentically for God? The story from I Samuel gives us some guidelines that might be helpful in any day and age as we seek to hear the voice of God.

First, *the voice of God speaks for justice*. The word God spoke to a young boy in the temple wasn't the word Samuel wanted to hear and it certainly wasn't the word Eli wanted to hear. But the word rang true because there was justice for those who had been wronged by Eli's corrupt sons. In asking whether a word is from the Lord, then, one question to ask is, "does it call for the best in you and for the best in the world? Does it hold people in positions of power accountable for their actions? Does it take into account the needs of the vulnerable? Is it a word of justice?"

Second, *the voice of God speaks of hope*. It might be hard to hear a word of hope in the message God gave Samuel, but if there was no hope there would have been no word to Samuel at all. God's light would have simply gone out in the temple never to be seen again among the people. So, in asking whether a word is from the Lord another question to ask is: Does the word speak to something beyond you, something beyond the present reality, something beyond the status quo? Does the word inspire us to dream bigger dreams and look into a future where things are set aright?"

Third, *the voice of God calls us to personal responsibility*. Time and time again the prophets called people to accept responsibility for their actions, to turn toward God, and to begin again. God's word to Eli, through Samuel, also called him to accept responsibility for his own part in the evil being done by his sons. So, in asking whether or not a word is from the Lord we must also ask: Does it make

me want to be a better person? Does it cause me to align my life more closely with the values of the kingdom of God?

Finally, *the voice of God calls us to act*. There was a call to action for Samuel, although it wasn't explicit in this first word from God. But God would speak to Samuel again and again. His whole life would become a declaration of God's activity in the kingdoms of this world as he responded to God's call. Another question to ask, then, concerning whether something is a word from God is: Does it call you to get outside of yourself and participate in the new thing God is doing? Does it set you on a path of discipleship in response to God's activity in the world?

So, this is a week of pomp and circumstance, but also a week of speeches, of holding up the past and looking into the future. On Monday, we will remember a man who, with his words and actions, inspired us to be a better, more just nation. On Tuesday, untold numbers of people will stand in the cold for hours to get a glimpse of an old Bible and a new president. What will he say, we wonder, as he lays his hand on Lincoln's Bible and promises to lead the nation forward?

On a week like this, let us look deeper than the rhetoric to really listen for how God might be addressing us. Let us be open to God's word in whatever way it may come to us. Let us pray for a word of justice, a word of hope, a call to responsibility, and a call to action...that our ears may tingle, and we may know that God is at work in the kingdoms of this world, in this age and in every age. It's an opportunity we have every four years. Let's seize it.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ Paraphrase: 1 Samuel 3:12-14