

1 Samuel 3:1-21

We've skipped quite a lot since last week's reading about manna in the wilderness. Between that story and today's story, the people have completed forty years of wandering and entered the land of Canaan. They have fought with the people of Canaan and made a place for themselves. There is a shrine at Shiloh—called "the temple" in this story, not the Temple that Solomon was to build in Jerusalem, but a precursor to that one. The people live as loosely affiliated tribes, governed by elders known as judges. But all is not well. The book of Judges, before 1 Samuel, ends with the tribes fighting among themselves and a concubine gang raped to death. The last sentence in Judges is this: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

So they've survived the time in the wilderness and they've found their home—they even have a shrine and regular priestly activity—but they are not living wisely or well. "The word of the Lord was rare in those days," the text tells us. "Visions were not widespread." The priests themselves, under the supervision of Eli, quickly became corrupt. Chapter 2 tells us that his sons were scoundrels who had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people. They helped themselves to the best of the meat of the sacrifices and slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. Eli reproached them, but they paid no attention and kept on abusing their office.

In this sad and dystopic chapter of Israel's existence, a woman named Hannah gives up her one precious child to serve in the temple under Eli. Talk about throwing good money after bad, only in this case it's her actual son, the only one she had. She said she'd do it if God gave her a son, and God did, so she did, but gosh it seems like a bleak ending to maybe four years of ardently wished-for motherhood. Adding to the weirdness, little Samuel apparently sleeps in the room where the ark of God is, sort of a surreal, Gothic-feeling place at night. Barbara

Brown Taylor imagined it this way:

"We can only guess what it was like for Samuel as the faithful brought their burnt-offerings, their sin-offerings, and their guilt-offerings to the temple. They were burdened, ashen-faced people, most of them, hauling their stubborn animals up to the altar to be killed. There was a great deal of blood, blood splashed on the altar and blood sprinkled on the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the sanctuary. The burning incense did battle with the smell but could not beat it; the place stank, no getting around it. . . .

"At night he lay down by the ark of God, the legendary throne of the invisible king Yahweh that Israel carried into battle at the head of her armies. It was reputed to contain all the sacred relics of the nation's past: a container of manna, Aaron's budded rod, the tablets of the covenant. Sleeping next to it had to be like sleeping in a graveyard, or under a volcano."ⁱ

All this is background to today's story, but it seems important that it takes place in such a dystopian, bleak setting. You get the sense that old Eli is just slogging through the motions, demoralized by the humdrum corruption of his priesthood, fully aware of his failure to mediate the holy to his people but resigned to continuing the slog because he doesn't know what else to do. And then one night young Samuel shows up at his bedside, saying, "Here I am, for you called me."

This odd scene repeats twice more, and then the penny drops for Eli. The LORD is calling the boy. The word of the LORD was rare in those days, but Eli has just caught on. And Samuel's just a kid and doesn't have a clue, so Eli gives him the script: "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" Which Samuel obediently does.

The news is not good. God is going to punish Eli for his failure to stop his sons from their corrupt behavior, and neither sacrifice nor offering can lift the stain from Eli's family, ever, ever, ever. God is done with Eli. Now, God doesn't tell Samuel to tell Eli or to tell anyone; God is just letting Samuel know. So think about that moment in the morning when Eli asks Samuel what God had said. How awful it would be to convey such a ruthless and final word of God's

abandonment to the old man, the man who has been a father figure to Samuel since he was tiny. He's only about 11 or 12 now, how can he say this heavy thing to Eli? But Eli is very clear with him that he wants to hear the unvarnished truth, and he does not lash out at the messenger, either. He just says, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

I had a friend in high school whose father was a priest at the Episcopal church, and she *hated* church. She had grown up in its shadow, and she saw all the unhealthy behavior, all the projection, all the hypocrisy. She was an unwilling insider, and the mystery and beauty of the liturgy was entirely lost on her because of her over-familiarity with the institution. Being a native can do that to you. It may be that Eli could not hear the word of the Lord *because of* his expertise and competence, not in spite of them. Being too acclimated can dull your senses, or limit your field of vision.

But Samuel represents those who come to God's service fresh. Samuel doesn't know much, but he hears when God speaks. It is such people, the text shouts, in whom the Lord delights in using as conduits for bringing the Word to the people.

What seems important about this text to me today: the tenderness between Eli and Samuel in this bleak time in Israel's life, tenderness despite Eli's awareness that he has fallen short as a religious authority. Eli isn't responsible for *all* the social decay and chaos, like the gang rape of the concubine and the wars between the tribes. But he hasn't done a great job at his little part. He hasn't taken effective, purposeful steps to reign in his sons, and he's allowed the public practice of worship to become a blasphemy. Eli and his generation have made a mess of the covenant community, and now it's becoming clear to him that little Samuel represents a new thing that God is doing, God having washed God's hands of Eli and his peers and moved on.

But Eli seems to love Samuel. He calls him "my son." Eli is the one who's equipped to

discern that Samuel's night vision is a visitation of God, and Samuel needs Eli to tell him what to do in this situation, as he does. Eli makes it safe for Samuel to give him the bad news, and he receives it calmly, without showing distress in a way that would traumatize the boy. And likewise, Samuel loves Eli. He doesn't want to tell Eli the bad news, not because he's afraid of him but because he cares about him.

This mutual tenderness is where I see redemption in this text. Even as God makes an abrupt turn away from business as usual, even as God tells Eli that the iniquity of his house cannot be expiated, even as Samuel learns how badly Eli has failed—the two of them still extend grace to each other. As tarnished as Eli's expertise is, Samuel needs it, because he has no experience. He could not move into the unknown future without Eli's guidance, even as he must also embrace his inexperience and naivete. Eli failed at a lot, but he succeeded in loving Samuel, and so he made it possible for him to carry God's mission the next bit of the way. I know the text says that God said God was just *done* with Eli, but I think this relationship with Samuel gives it away: God is never *done* with any of us, and however much failing we've done with our lives, if we love someone and someone loves us, we've participated in God's work of bringing heaven to earth.

We confess that we do not expect to meet you on the familiar roads we travel and so we fail to discern your presence or your call on our lives. Holy Spirit, you empower us to recognize and to respond to your call, even when that means travelling on unknown and unfamiliar paths... Merciful God, take from us all that hinders our hearing your voice and fill us anew with the Holy Spirit that we may joyfully respond to your call on our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

ⁱ <http://www.deaconsil.com/catalog/product1250.html>