

Year B

Second Sunday After Epiphany

Samuel 3:1-10

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

How often do WE actually say those words of Samuel’s? How often are we ready to listen to what God has to say to us? ARE we paying attention?

In today’s Old Testament lesson, we see the boy Samuel, serving as an acolyte in the Lord’s temple. He sleeps near the Holy of Holies to guard it, and to keep the lamp that is near it lit. One of the first things we learn about the temple in this reading is that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” Think about that—that is quite a condemnation. Even Eli himself, the designated priest of God, does not receive visions, or words from the Lord anymore. The narrator emphasizes this by saying that Eli’s “eyesight had grown dim so that he could not see,” so Eli is blind, both spiritually and physically. We learn in this lesson, he is really a failed leader, and his sons have desecrated the temple, and dishonored the Lord. That is the reason that the Lord comes to Samuel this night. And what sad irony that Eli’s name literally means “my God.”

But, the narrator says “the lamp of God had not yet gone out,” that is, figuratively speaking, there is still some flicker of light left in this community. As Samuel is lying on his pallet in the temple, he hears his name, “Samuel, Samuel” and thinking his master Eli is calling him, he says, “here I am!” and he runs to Eli. He runs to “Eli/my God,” the person who has been like a god to him so far. Samuel hears, but he is confused. And we see that Samuel confuses Eli and God three times, as three separate times the Lord calls his name—because Samuel “did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.” Interestingly, Samuel’s name means “God has heard.” Here we see another play on words: Samuel has heard, but he hasn’t understood.

God has heard, and God calls Samuel. And yet when God calls to him, Samuel responds to God's call, even though he doesn't realize it.

After these three visits from a confused little Samuel, Eli is now fully awake and, although it has been a long time since the Lord has spoken to anyone in the temple, he understands that God is now speaking to this little boy. So he tells Samuel what to do if he hears the Lord's voice again, he is to say, "speak Lord, for your servant is listening." You can imagine Samuel's fear as he went back to lie down on his pallet. And indeed, this time "the Lord came and STOOD there, calling as before, 'Samuel, Samuel'" and Samuel said, 'speak, for your servant is listening.'" Poor Samuel now hears something from the Lord that he probably never wanted to hear, or imagined hearing. The Lord is going to punish Eli, his mentor, for his inability to lead God's people, and for allowing his sons to commit sacrilege in the temple. No sin offering will be enough to atone for these transgressions; the Lord is going to transfer the priesthood to someone else's line, entirely. Eli has failed, he is having his authority stripped from him, and God has entrusted this little boy with the message.

Samuel lay there, awake until morning, and no doubt he wondered if he would have to tell Eli what the Lord had said. The narrator says he was afraid to tell the vision to Eli, but Eli calls for him in the morning, "Samuel, my son," a sign of great affection. Of course, he does require Samuel to tell him the vision. So Samuel tells of the catastrophe that is coming upon Eli's house. And if Samuel had any doubts about what he'd heard from the voice in the night, Eli's acceptance put those doubts to rest: "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him." Perhaps, even in his disgrace, Eli is relieved to acknowledge, and put down, the heavy burden of his failed leadership.

And so this is the beginning of Samuel's long career as a prophet and king-maker. He becomes well-known, and highly regarded: "The Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan (that is up North) to Beer-sheba (way down South) knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord."

As I was reading and pondering this lesson, I could not help but see parallels in our current situation. Of course, we are not governed by temple priests, but certainly, so many of our leaders have failed us on every level. We're in the midst of a worldwide pandemic, in which, every minute or two, an American dies of COVID-19. The last few months have seen political unrest unlike any we have known for decades: riots, sedition, and the illegal invasion of our capitol by armed men. As we near the inauguration of a new president, there is real concern for the peaceful transfer of power—something we have always smugly taken for granted in the past. In the face of this, it's hard to feel safe. It is easy to feel helpless, angry, outraged and betrayed by so much of what is happening right now. And so what do we do? Not one of us has the power, single-handedly, to change what's happening in Washington, or in the halls of government in our states. But we are not single-handed, my friends. We have each other, and we have a Savior who calls us to love one another as he loves us. Not to revile one another for political beliefs, or curse one another for being of a different race, or from another country, but to love. To hold one another to a higher standard than the world does. We have a Savior who says "follow me." Not forge ahead into reaction to events, but to mindfully do what Jesus did: feed the hungry, advocate for the oppressed, heal the sick, help the poor. When we do these things, and demand that our elected leaders do these things, we are not single-handed. We are hand in hand with Christ. And don't misunderstand me—I'm not saying this is easy. It's not easy. But right now we are seeing the result of NOT doing it, and I think THIS is hard, don't you?

Speak Lord, for your servant is listening. Amen

The Rev. Melanie K. Lewis

January 17, 2021