

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
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### I Samuel 3:1-21

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am." And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down. Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. A third time the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." And the LORD said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.'" Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, but Eli called him and said, "Samuel, my son." Samuel answered, "Here I am." "What was it he said to you?" Eli asked. "Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you." So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, "He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes." The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.

### **Eli's Awakening**

I have a memory, it may have happened here at this church. It was a time for children and kids were acting out the call of Samuel. Samuel sleeping and God (a voice from a far) saying "Samuel, Samuel." Samuel running to Eli, who tells him to go back to sleep. A second run through of the same scenario until the magic third time when Eli realizes what is going on that though Samuel is young, just a boy it is God who is speaking to him.

*Then Eli perceived that God was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go lie down, and if He calls you, you shall say "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."*

The bible is full of call stories, but this one is unique because it requires someone --

Eli -- to mediate the call, to mentor Samuel and help him see what is going on.

If you ask many a person who has felt called by God how that came to be in more cases than not you will find this -- not a burning bush experience but something that involved other people, other people asking someone to do something, and the seed was planted or someone simply confirming in someone else gifts for ministry that were there all along. I like this story because first it has a young person in it and second, because there is this older person, this more experienced person, this person with greater power and status not just helping the younger person perceive God's call but then actually *listening* to what the younger person has to say.

In our bible study this week we all got hooked, snagged, triggered on the fact that Eli is going to be punished for the sins of his sons, which is the message that Samuel shares with Eli. Eli's sons were blaspheming God, and Eli did not restrain them, did not appropriately guide them in the way they should go and now, in light of this there are going to be repercussions. Eli's time in the sun is over, and Eli makes Samuel share this, this word that God has given Samuel.

Wait a minute we all said. So Eli the priest had sons who didn't follow God's ways and Eli is going to get punished for it? Are we completely responsible for everything our kids become once they grow up? Most of us didn't like this idea at all. You had the sense that around the collective room- at least among the parents there -- that there were things that would not be shared -- less than responsible, less than admirable things that our beloved offspring had said or done.

It just felt to us that God was being hard on Eli, you know? The story made us *uncomfortable*. But it led to a conversation about the importance of accountability. In this story, and in so many others, God has a sense of direction, a way in which the people are to go. Have we lost something when we make God out to be only about welcome, inclusion and unconditional love? Is there not a way, a path that leads to life and might there be within God's power this capacity for course correction for that is what this passage is about: God speaking, God intervening, God bringing forth new leadership... and the reality that there will be consequences for ignoring or openly defying the will of God.

Once our bible study got off the snag, the hook, the trigger of poor Eli being punished for his son's transgressions we were able to see some very good, very honorable things about Eli. He mentors young Samuel, helps him realize it's God he's listening for. And when Samuel gets the word, *Eli wants to hear it*. Even if it is difficult, he says to Samuel, don't hide it from me. And when he hears it, he doesn't react, doesn't act defensive, He doesn't make excuses (he knew who his sons were and maybe didn't blame God a second for saying "enough") Eli puts his trust in God, saying let God do what seems good to God. Eli may have had sons who are no good, but he himself is still listening for God.

Maybe this story doesn't want to put a spotlight on Eli, as I am today. The books of First and Second Samuel are really court history. They tell the story of leadership, and how things moved from one leader to another, and from judges who ruled more loosely to kings, who asked more of their people and ruled more firmly. So maybe this story of Samuel and Eli is justification for it being Samuel's turn, just an accounting of a particular time, a leadership change, and not much more than that.

But is it reading too much into it to say that Eli's life was changed by the call that Samuel received that night? Eli no longer thought that the word of the Lord was rare, getting more scarce. There, in the temple, in the wee hours of the night something happened, an awakening in Eli of a God who was still working, still bringing something forth in a world that had prior to this seemed bereft of God and God's vision. Eli's eyesight may be growing dim, he may have trouble seeing but that night his heart was quickened, his faith quickened. His own personal weaknesses or failures and those of his own children would in no way be a block to hamper the work of God, which is, when you think about it a very good thing to understand.

This passage leads me to ponder awakenings in our times. I think of the church, and the way we are awakening to the fact that we can't be the church of the nineteen fifties, you know build a church and throw open the doors and people will come. We can't do youth group or Sunday school the way we used to, and the truth is, while we may think up new forms, new ways of doing things, more and more people say they don't need the church to be a spiritual person and that's a real challenge to the church.

I think of how we are awakening to increased gun violence. People said if Sandy Hook didn't do it, nothing will but now we add to schools as places that may not be safe nightclubs, movie theaters, churches, college campuses, and outdoor concerts. I think of the Harvey Weinstein problem, which is also the Bill Cosby problem and is a problem in no way limited to Hollywood. This week has led many women to share stories of sexual harassment, a thing which should not, like gun violence, just be "part of life", "part of our culture." This week Mary Luti, a wellknown UCC pastor, shared on her Facebook page of being sexually harassed in seminary, for goodness sake.

I sense we are awakening too to the threat of climate change, a problem which most certainly has had an effect on the hurricanes down south and fires out west. I sense we are awakening to a deeper compassion for mental health issues, for brothers and sisters who struggle with the loneliness and stigma that often accompanies mental health issues. I look to our front window and the sign, hashtag 2,069 (the number of deaths in the year 2016 in Massachusetts from opioid overdose) and am reminded that we are awakening to the drug crisis which has hit this part of southeastern Massachusetts so very hard.

An interesting question for a church dinner or post worship discussion: What are you more aware of now than you were five, or ten years ago?

What experiences made you so aware and how do you sense God at work in that awakening?

Along with these awakenings -- the ones I've named here today, the ones you might name if given time and space -- I believe there are deep spiritual awakenings taking place. In the midst of all this chaos and disease our longings for something deep and sustaining increase. I think of Dale Thackery's sermon last week at Al Hoyt's ordination service. She spoke of things eternal, and of the peace of God, a gift to those who follow Jesus. Someone this week told me they saw me looking up at her, listening and "looking angelic". Well, I don't know how angelic I was, but I was drinking it up. Her words were water for parched souls, and many of you told me you felt the same way.

So where does this leave us today? Maybe with a heart of compassion for Eli, who is in many ways us. Eli hasn't done everything right, but he is not his grotesque sons who have been so wayward and offensive. Likewise for us in the church today, we know many have written off the church because of the grotesque sons, the one who hoist up their bibles and claim the faith while speaking and acting in ways that are an affront to human decency. In my mind Eli is like the church, buoyed about by many winds, yet still hanging in there, still trying to listen for a word from God, which is something in this day and age. And here in our church we don't always get it right, we make our share of mistakes, but still I think for many of us, certainly for many of us here today, the church is a place of both comfort and vision, a place where the Spirit speaks and we, together, try to listen and respond.

Eli encourages me that God isn't finished with the church yet, or with any of us for that matter. God will renew the church. God will keep using us, if we like Eli and Samuel, keep listening.

Amen.