

B Lectionary 9 6.2.24

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Focus Statement: Part of faithful work is passing on the labor to empower others

Like last summer, this summer I really wanted to spend our worship time digging into the Old Testament stories from the lectionary and exploring how these ancient tales still speak to us. Unfortunately, I only get two weeks to do that, then I'll be taking a long break from preaching, so you'll be reading about Saul and David without me, and I won't get to pop back in until Solomon. So before we get into talking about Samuel, I want to start by laying the groundwork for the summer, so you have some frame of reference as you hear these passages going forward.

When we left off last summer, Israel had come through the Exodus and settled in the Promised Land. Moses and his successor Joshua had both died, and Israel was ruled by a series of judges. Some of the judges were good, some, not so good, but there was no one central leader of Israel. The problem was, all the countries around them had kings, and Israel was jealous, it wanted a king too. God, as we'll hear next week, did not think this was a good idea. But God did what they asked and gave them a king, and all summer you'll hear stories of the first three of those kings, their strengths and their weaknesses. Samuel, who we meet this week, is the prophet of God who identifies those first two kings.

We meet Samuel as a boy "ministering to the Lord under Eli." But both he and Eli have backstories that are important to understand. Samuel is the oldest son of a woman named Hannah. Hannah was married to a man named Peninnah, and though she was his favorite wife—Peninnah had two wives, this is culturally weird for us but wasn't in one thousand

BCE, so just go with it. So anyway, even though Hannah was Peninnah's favorite wife, she was upset because she had no children. So one day when she and her family were in town to worship the Lord, she went by herself into the place of worship to pray to God for a child. She promised God that if she was granted a son, she would give him to the Lord as God's servant. Hannah was so distressed that as she prayed, she moved her lips, but no sound came out. Eli the priest saw her and at first thought she was drunk. But when Hannah explained her distress, her desire for a son, and her promise to give that son to God, Eli blessed her and promised her that God had heard her cries and would answer her prayer. Sure enough, as Eli had said, Hannah soon conceived and bore a son. And when the boy was old enough, she returned to Eli and gave the boy to him for Eli to raise as a priest. After giving Samuel to Eli, Hannah sang a prayer of praise to God. The prayer is in 1 Samuel chapter two, and I encourage you to read it because it's beautiful, but I'll give you the highlights. It is a lot like the prayer Mary prayed about Jesus in Luke's Gospel, full of themes of God lifting up the lowly and casting down the mighty, especially those who use their power against God and, more specifically, God's people. Over the summer you'll see this theme repeated, of God raising leaders to power who raise up those in need, and either turning on or punishing those same leaders if they stop being good shepherds of God's people.

So that's Samuel. But Eli too had a backstory. Eli was a priest in the town of Shiloh, in charge of watching over the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant was a box where the Israelites kept the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Moses. It had traveled with them through exile, reminding them of God's presence with them. When the Temple is

eventually constructed, it will end up there. But for right now, it is the most sacred thing in the Israelite faith tradition, and Eli was its caretaker. And Eli was, by all accounts, a good and faithful priest and servant of the Lord. But Eli had these two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who were, this is a direct quote from 1 Samuel chapter two verse twelve, “scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people.” In other words, they were the sort of folk Hannah sung about being taken down from their places of privilege. Eli had hoped his sons would take over for him as priests and continue his legacy, but at the end of chapter two we learn in no uncertain terms that Eli’s legacy ends with Eli. Both his sons will die and God will raise up a new “faithful priest” to lead God’s people. This is in the background as we meet the boy Samuel in our reading today, there is an opening in the role of main priest of the Lord. Samuel is a child given to God as a servant, and Eli is a priest in need of a successor.

Our story opens at night, with Eli asleep in his room and Samuel asleep next to the Ark of the Covenant. A couple of interesting details to note. First off, there is an emphasis on vision. The text tells us that “in those days; visions were not widespread.” We also learn that Eli’s “eyesight had begun to grow dim.” This could be a normal result of aging, it could also be a nod to him beginning to lose his role as chief authority of God’s word, he no longer “sees” God like he used to. Meanwhile, in the room where Samuel lay, next to the ark, a known source of divine presence, “the lamp of God had not yet gone out.” This too could be just a time reference, one of the roles of the priest was to light the lamp near the ark to burn through the night until dawn, so this could just be telling us it’s still nighttime. But it could also point out a difference between Eli’s dimming vision and Samuel’s place in a lit room.

Into this lit room, the Lord came to Samuel three different times and called him by name. And all three of those times, Samuel didn't realize it was the Lord calling, so he went and asked Eli what Eli wanted and why he called him. The text assures us, Samuel wasn't dense or naïve for not recognizing the Lord's call. He was just a kid, and visions like this were rare. No one had ever taught him what the Lord's call would sound like, he had no frame of reference for recognizing such a call. Even Eli, a priest of the Lord, missed what was really going on the first two times.

But on the third time, Eli "perceived that the Lord was calling the boy." Again a vision word. Eli, with his dimming eyesight, finally found enough clarity to say, wait a minute, I know what's happening here, and he instructed his young student in how to respond to God's call. "Go, lie down; and if God calls you, you shall say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Samuel did exactly as Eli had instructed, and from here on out Samuel became the faithful priest God told Eli God was looking for.

I've always read and preached this text from the perspective of Samuel, a boy faithfully answering God's call. "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening," is such a powerful testament of faith and trust in God's call. But this time, for whatever reason, it was Eli who really captured my attention. Because think about Eli. Here's this guy who's devoted his whole life to service. Everything he's done has been about serving God and God's people. And he's just found out that his entire legacy is going to be wiped out, with nothing to show for it. He had to have been devastated.

Yet when his young student Samuel came to him with news of this strange calling, when Eli realized it was the Lord, he didn't lie to Samuel, hide it from him, or try in any other way to impede God's call. Instead, he continued in his role of teacher and mentor to Samuel, giving the boy everything he needed to take over Eli's spot in the limelight.

Eli, I think, gives us a powerful lesson in raising up new leaders. And, here's the thing, I've talked rather apocalyptically about the end of Eli's legacy, but his legacy didn't end here, it lived on through Samuel. Everything Samuel becomes is because of what Eli taught him. Eli's past becomes Samuel's, and through Samuel the people of God's, future. The rest of Israel's history is shaped by Eli's message to Samuel, "if [God] calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

Dear people of God, I think the message of this passage is that our work has seasons. And it is ok, even healthy and faithful, to turn that work over to another. Sometimes, like Eli, so that we can step away from the work entirely. But not always. Sometimes it is helpful to hand work over, like Jesus did with his disciples, so that there can be more hands engaged in the work or simply so you can be free to do other work. Because, here's the hard learned truth from my time off last year, you, I, none of us, can do all the work. We need other people to help. The work gets done better when more people are doing it. Will they do it exactly like you would, no, likely not. But they will bring their own skills and passions to it, and more can get done. This requires letting go of some control, but the results are amazing. Eileen and the property team get more done than I ever did when I was trying to

manage the building on my own. Gloria's taken over organizing a tech team, and last I heard there were like six or seven of you on board. Mary has a gift of hospitality that I've never managed. If you enjoyed the set-up of the worship we had on Maundy Thursday, that was all Mary, all I did was bring soup. Wayne's owned Freeze Pops for years, turning it from me and a cooler full of popsicles to all sorts of yard games, crafts, and conversation. And we can reach outside our congregation too. Think of all the gifts and ideas Co-op brings to the building.

This is a lot of what we're looking to do with this community center idea. To share the work with others. To invite more people into the mission, so that God's kingdom will spread. And just like Eli's legacy anchored who Samuel became, our legacy anchors this work. And we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. Who first felt the need for a worshipping community in the Post Addition, and who committed to staying in this neighborhood even when they'd outgrown that building. Eli is a model for us of raising up new leaders, new voices, so that God's message can be lived out in new ways. Thanks be to God for Eli's faithfulness, and may we too be blessed with new voices with new ideas with whom we can share God's call. Amen.