

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk

Delivered: Sunday, January 18, 2015

Theme: ***Who's – or Whose - Calling***

Text: **1 Samuel 3:1-20 (NRSV):**

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord 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.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

Reflections:

I know I should stop being surprised by this, but since becoming your pastor over three years ago now, I continue to be amazed at how much there continues to be discovered in the pages of scripture and in all of God's realm as we delve into these explorations each week.

Here again today, we have a story that I have heard over and over and over again during my lifetime and was, indeed, one of my absolute favorite stories to be told as a child since it's HAS a child, little Samuel, at the heart of the story.

So it was with a hearty laugh and a nice brisk slap of God's cool water in my face when I started to read this story once again and the phrase, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days" leapt out at me like I had never heard it before.

This phrase is at the heart of our story and explorations for today as I think many of us would say the Word of the Lord seems to be pretty rare these days as well.

And other than the sighting of the Virgin Mary in the form of a potato chip or the face of Jesus in the foam of a Starbucks double Chai Latte, visions are not widespread in our day, either!

But who is it that steps into the heart of the story and hears the Word of our God and is open to God's calling? Why a child, of course, someone whose heart is available, whose ears are not jaded and whose soul is wide open to what his Still-speaking God had to say. Oh, he could also see from a place his elder Eli could not, as the scriptures tell us Eli's eyesight had begun to grow dim. I think we can take that phrase with all of its meaning, both physically and spiritually as Eli had to be awakened three times by Samuel's approach before he could "SEE" that it was indeed God calling.

How often do we not hear God's calling I wonder? Is it because we don't know it's God calling or is it because we think we haven't heard or listened for God's call for so long that our eyesight is dim and our awareness dull?

God gives us so much to look at in this passage and it's up to us to be awake to the wisdom and listening for that still-speaking voice ourselves.

In our lectionary Psalm for today, number 139, we hear the Psalmist declaring:

"O God, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue,

O God, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me."

Surely this is a God who is always present to us, and whose Word is only rare inasmuch as we make it so. How often have I realized my own stubbornness and ignorance was keeping me from hearing what God was truly saying to me? How often have I realized that it has been my own unwillingness to see the ways in which God was directing me along the path that has kept me from the true and glorious fulfillment of what God wants for me?

For it is only in step with God, in communication with Christ, and in communion with the Holy Spirit that we find the answers for our life and proclaim in praise that we are truly "fearfully and wonderfully made."

Did you notice in the story how Samuel responds to God's voice as if it were Eli's? Again and again he rises, thinking that the voice calling, "Samuel, Samuel" must be the voice of his mentor, the one who until this point in time was, he thought, the only one calling for him and giving him direction. But in this moment and in this place and time, the Elder finally wakes up and leads the boy into his own calling, encouraging him to receive the voice of the Lord and proclaim to God rather than man, "Here I am!" and "Speak for your servant is listening."

"God is constantly speaking in our lives through insights, encounters, hunches, dreams, bursts of energy, and inspirational thoughts," Dr. Bruce Epperly wrote on his blog this week, "Living a Holy Adventure." "Our calling is to listen and then follow, shaping our encounters with God in our own unique ways... Samuel's response serves as a model for our own spiritual formation. Our daily prayers," Dr. Epperly writes, "should include a plea that we listen to God's whisperings in our lives. This prayer is completed by our willingness to pause and be still to heighten our awareness of divine wisdom... Nothing is too small or large for divine awareness and activity."

We can see ourselves in both roles of this story, I believe. For each of us has a role to play in the kin-dom of God, you know. Perhaps you are someone with the gift to see the presence of God in another and to help him or her step into his or her own calling. Or maybe you're the bright, fresh presence, ready to listen and ready to receive, but needing the encouragement that what you're hearing is right and what you perceive is of God. All roles are needed in carrying out this great God play we find ourselves in.

As Samuel, we need to present ourselves fully to God with the readiness and willingness to be transformed by whatever we hear God speaking. We need to find a way to trust that the inner voice

we're hearing is truly the voice of God and not become so bogged down with all the chatter of the world that we stop listening to the still small voice within.

"I do not want my too many words to separate you from astonishment or to provide you with a substitute for your own inner experience," Father Richard Rohr wrote in his essay, "Knowing and Not Knowing" this week. "We all need, forever, what Jesus described as "the beginner's mind" of a curious child. A beginner's mind or what some call "constantly renewed immediacy" is the best path for spiritual wisdom. Tobin Hart writes: "Instead of grasping for certainty, wisdom rides the question, lives the question.... When the quest for certainty and control is pushed to the background, the possibility of wonder returns. Wonder provides a gateway to wise insight."

And what wonder awaited Samuel as he responded at last to God's call and listened to what God had to tell him. As his ears were opened and he heard the word of the Lord it wasn't a happy word by any means, but a word of fulfillment and truth that apparently needed to be heard by Eli since he accepted it so readily and without question.

Sometimes in our Calling we must be prepared to deliver truth that doesn't feel so good or that we would prefer not be true if possible. But God tells us again and again that the truth shall set us free. Accepting that which comes from God and not being afraid to step out in that truth can mean great risk. And yet we can surely know that God goes with us in the truth telling, assuring us that whatever happens as a result is of God and through God whether we can experience the result or not.

As we gather here on this Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, how can we but help to remember a man who truly strode into his calling, speaking the truth given to him, aware of the consequences, but listening deeply and acting profoundly on what he heard.

In his essay, "Maybe God is Trying to Tell You Something," H. Beeker Hicks, Jr. finds this correlation between the 12-year-old Samuel and the 30-something Dr. King. He writes, "...to read the story of Samuel whose life serves as background to the place of Dr. King, is to understand that in order for spiritual or social change to be accomplished, one must first be awakened to the world around you...Dr. Allan Boesak," Mr. Hicks writes, "has suggested that 'God must raise up faithful men and women who have heard God's voice in the cries of the oppressed, who take refuge in the love of God and from within that place of refuge (find) courage and step into the world to challenge the powers of evil.'"

Wake up, Samuel. Wake up, people of God. Wake, awake, O my Soul and follow the leading of Christ for the empowerment of not just one's self, but for all of God's people.

And then, of course, there's the priest, Eli. An old man, worn down by life and a lifetime of service to Yahweh. Reading earlier in chapter two of first Samuel, we see that Eli had his hands full with his sons who, as the Inclusive Bible puts it without pulling any punches,, "were thugs." And even though Eli tried to deal with his wayward sons and reproached them strongly, he knew that Yahweh would not be mocked and, indeed, as we hear from Samuel in our passage today, hands down a stunning judgment against the faithful old priest.

It seems pretty unfair, if you ask me. I have to agree with writer John C. Holbert who, in looking at this passage in an article he calls, "Whose Voice" says, "YHWH appears quite arbitrary in these stories and no more so than in the way Eli is treated here."

But looking at Eli's side of the story in a different way, I think we can also gain insight into our own calls. For here is someone on the other side of their Call, if you know what I mean. Someone who heard the voice of God probably when he was as young as Samuel, or perhaps a bit later in his life, but certainly a long time before the account we have before us today. And although we don't know much about Eli other than his priestly lineage and his interaction with Samuel's mother, Hannah; we do learn in an article written by Nissan Mindel that Eli was, "a kind man by nature, and he was beloved by all the people who looked to him for spiritual guidance."

And as difficult as it is to accept the harsh punishment of Yahweh relayed by Samuel, I had to wonder at the way in which Eli accepted it so readily and without question. For, in some ways, I think Eli realized that he had been asleep for part of his life and had not stayed involved in the matters of his

people and of his God in the way he had been called to be. The scriptures tell us that Eli was very old when he learned the truth of how his sons treated all the people of Israel. Perhaps God is telling us through this story that we must be awake and ready every moment of our lives, no matter what our age. Sometimes it is so tempting to believe we've found our call or heard the voice of God and then we're done.

But, as we hopefully know, God's kin-dom doesn't work that way. Just as the world keeps on turning, so must we continue to renew our call, seek new visions and keep abreast of what is happening around us in our own families and communities. Be involved, God tells us. Keep your head in the game. Be my ears and eyes as co-creators with me. Even when our own frail human senses seem dimmed God is still speaking and leading us to the truth if we are open to it.

"Here I AM," Samuel replies repeatedly to the call he hears. Can we, as we go forward in our lives as this New Year begins to unfold respond so faithfully to the Call WE receive? Can we step out of our comfort zones and seek new ways to understand and to be in this world? Can we reach out to those who are in need of the prophetic word God has given specifically to us? Can we be a witness to the wonderful ways God works through us, no matter what our age when we have the courage to say, "I know it is God calling and God is calling me?"

"A sense of calling represents a step toward greater self-awareness," Paul Keim wrote in his article, "Call Me" for the Christian Century. "To become aware of a call is to be aware of oneself in a new way, as the psalmist was aware: You know me, O Lord. You've done the research. You've read my file. Through the call I know myself as someone known; my life as something comprehended from beginning to end; my days as already written in that book "when none of them as yet existed." This is no recipe for fatalistic determinism, but rather a profound metaphor providing a way out of the modern dilemma. In the place of an alienated self at the center of an arbitrary, amoral universe, or a postmodern ghost trying to conjure up its name through myriad manipulations, we choose to live as those known and called by name."

Amen.