

“RETHINKING FAITHFULNESS FOR A NEW DAY”

1 Samuel 3:1-21

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Why was a story about corrupt politicians, unethical businessmen, and the judgment of God against Israel’s current leadership ever considered appropriate for children? I know. This is not what your Sunday School teacher told you about the call of Samuel.

I remember it as one of the few stories featuring a child. There’s David as a youth taking down Goliath, the boy Jesus in the temple, the wise men honoring the baby Jesus, and Jesus the adult blessing the children. Then there are a number of stories featuring barren women giving birth: Sarah giving birth to Isaac, Rachel to Joseph, Hannah to Samuel. And of course there is everyone’s favorite, the Christmas story about the baby Jesus. Later this summer, we’ll also talk about Moses being found by Pharaoh’s daughter among the bulrushes.

Each of these stories forecasts a more hopeful future for God’s people. We often say that the children are our future. As many mainline churches grow smaller and smaller, the sense of need for young people seems to grow more urgent. So, of course, we like these stories with children. And we like this story about Samuel, even though it calls into question the traditions surrounding leadership and undermines the priesthood.

I remember Samuel as a funny story: the back and forth between the boy and Eli until the priest, who ought to have known from the beginning, figures out that it’s the Lord speaking to Samuel. I can still picture the teacher moving Samuel on the flannel board back and forth between his bed and Eli. I did wonder why the Lord should speak to Samuel and not Eli, but only briefly. The teacher didn’t have much to say about the opening sentence: “And the Word of Lord was rare in those days.” If it was mentioned at all, these words were taken to be a reflection on the world, not on the state of the priesthood.

And I remember the lesson contained in the short sentence, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” We don’t always recognize at first when God is saying something to us. But God keeps calling until we finally stop what we’re doing and just listen, a good lesson for all of us, but especially I think for those whom we ordain today. But that’s where the lesson the ended even though the story went on. We never talked about the message that the Lord spoke to Samuel. Sometimes we were even told that the content of the message wasn’t the real point. So most of us don’t remember that God had judged the house of Eli, found it wanting, and was going to destroy it.

Now I liked my Sunday School teachers and they taught the lesson that they were supposed to teach, the lesson appropriate for children. And what they taught me nurtured my faith and grounded me from an early age in the message of the Bible. If you were one of those who taught these stories to children, thank you.

The great thing about the Bible is that the stories continue to say new things to us as we mature and face new challenges in life. So I want to go into teacher mode here and share some things about this story that you may not have heard as a child. And the first thing I'd to do is fill out the historical context for us.

Samuel lived at the end of the period of the judges between the time when the tribes of Israel first entered Canaan and the rise of the monarchy with David and Solomon. Samson, Gideon, and Deborah were all judges. Israel is not yet a nation, but a loose confederation of tribes that would bind themselves together when enemies threatened. Each tribe had their own leaders, but in a crisis, the Spirit of the Lord would descend on an individual to lead them (usually militarily) through the threat. The Hebrew word translated as judge means more literally "liberator." When an enemy threatened, a leader arose to "liberate" the people.

These tribes were held together by a common faith in the God, Yahweh. The priesthood under the direction of a separate tribe without a land supervised the practice of their religion through a set of laws and rituals. Until Samuel, priests inherited their office. Eli, as a descendant of Levi (thus "Levites"), came to be high priest. It's crucial to understand that in this time, religion, politics, and the economy are all intertwined. Samuel would be baffled by the attempt of many today to view money, politics and faith as separate spheres. Power in all these areas rested primarily with the priests. So when the priesthood itself became corrupt, unethical business practices and abuses of power naturally followed.

This is the state of things when Samuel is born. Instead of nurturing faith, the priests used the prescribed rituals to accumulate wealth and to satisfy their own desires: money and sex. This is sketched out for us in chapter 2 where Eli's sons abuse their authority for personal gain. Eli is presumed to be innocent of abuse, but guilty of ineffective parenting and failing to maintain the integrity of the priesthood. In a sentence, the Word of God has become rare because the priests have stopped listening. Therefore God will replace them, and God tells Samuel this.

Samuel represents not only the future, but also the destruction of the old way. This is another story where God starts over. Adam and Eve can't make it work in the garden, so God sends them out to work in the world. The world becomes wicked, so God starts over with Noah, and then with Abraham, and then with Moses, and here with Samuel, and later with David.

Some things this children's story make me wonder about:

Are we living in a time when the Word of the Lord has become rare? Have the powers within the church and around the world stopped listening and pursued their own interests instead of honoring God and nurturing faithfulness among the peoples of the earth? Have we chosen accommodation over the prophetic word? Do we have the courage to say, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening," even if the Word is a call for radical change?

Many would say that we are in a time of crisis, the church, our country, and the world. What kind of starting over is God calling for? And who will lead us through the crisis?

I wonder what this story may have to say to the elders we ordain today.

You have never served on a Presbyterian session before. Perhaps you could see yourselves as children in the arena of church government. You are bringing new eyes. If change is called for, you may be the first to see it. You're joining session members who I believe have been attentive to God's leading, but... it's possible that once or twice we have found ourselves trapped in the seven last words of the church: "We've never done it that way before." It's possible that we've become comfortable with certain ways of doing things that don't serve us, the church, or the world well.

"Speak Lord, your servant is listening." When Samuel said this, the transformation of the peoples of Israel, this loose confederation of tribes into a nation, was begun.

Samuel, after a lengthy ministry to God's people, will go on to anoint first Saul and then David as kings of Israel. The monarchy wasn't perfect. It would also become corrupted, but it did bind the people together in a way they hadn't known before. And even though they strayed from that faith many times, the faith of Israel also deepened. When Israel would lose its status as a nation, its faith would again deepen and develop in different ways and become the faith that nurtured Jesus, a faith which he deepened and passed on to his disciples.

So many people from Samuel to the present day have paused when they heard the call and said, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." This is where change begins, where a new faithfulness develops, and where leaders discover a blessing. Many things are changing for church and world. Some things will be ending. New things will be born. Faithfulness for this new day very much depends on listening. Perhaps the Word of the Lord will not be rare if only we will attend to it.

Amen.