

“Behold, me!” GPPC 1-14-18
John 1:43-51, 1 Samuel 3:1-20

On this Sunday when we ordain and install a new class of elders who will help to lead our church, maybe it’s a happy bit of providence that the lectionary suggests the reading from 1 Samuel. The story, like being an elder, is fun and serious at the same time. And maybe the fun is intended as Mary Poppins sang, “A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down. The medicine go down.”

1 Samuel’s ancient narrative is shrouded in mystery but also possibility. It is in some ways a hard word, yet also a sturdy and glad word, a word from a long time ago, and a word that seems written just this morning.

Some background. The place for the action is the Temple. And we read that “the boy Samuel [is] ministering to the Lord under Eli.” Eli is an elderly priest who has two crooked priest sons, Hophni and Phinehas. These sons use their priestly positions not only to steal portions of temple food meant as an offering for God, but also to sleep with vulnerable women who have shown up to worship God. Look up the

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words “creep” and “abuser” in a Bible encyclopedia, and you’ll see beady-eyed photos of Hophni and Phinehas.

There are always people who use ministry for greedy self-enrichment and for preying upon the vulnerable.

Eli, as we shall see, is aware of what his sons are up to. But he does nothing.

There are always people of faith who see injustice and oppression, but who say and do nothing about it.

But then there is the boy Samuel. He is ministering to the Lord under the tutelage of this weak, old priest, Eli. Worse yet, we’re told that the word of the Lord is “rare in those days.” “Visions [are] not widespread.” And Eli, whose eyesight has “begun to grow dim so that he [cannot] see” is “lying down in his room.”

This does not sound like a promising situation, does it? Yet we are also told that “the lamp of God [has] not yet gone out.” Things look dark, yet there is still this flicker of light that has not gone out. “And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

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For people of faith, there is always hope. No matter what you and I face, there is always hope, because, despite all appearances to the contrary, God is alive and at work in the world.

And here the story takes a turn toward comedy that could star Jerry Lewis, Kevin Hart, or Tina Fey. Along with Eli, Samuel is also lying down in the temple of the Lord. And God calls his name, “Samuel! Samuel!” And he answers, “Here I am!” Literally in the Hebrew he answers, “Behold, me!” Maybe a way of saying, “Here I am. At your service.” Then he gets up, runs to Eli, and says, “Here I am! (Behold, me!) I came because you called.”

And you know how the story goes. Eli says, “I didn’t call you. Go lie down again.” This happens three times. (You’d think people could hear God’s voice more clearly in the holy worship space, but maybe they are having microphone issues.) Anyway, after the third time Eli finally figures out that God is speaking, and Eli tells Samuel to go lie down, and if the voice calls again, Samuel is to say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And the text says God actually comes and stands there and calls and Samuel answers, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

So God does speak, but the news is not pleasant. God promises judgment and punishment for Eli and his house, because Eli has known of his sons' evil behavior, but he has done nothing. And with this word ricocheting through his mind, Samuel lies in his bed until morning, and then he arises to open the doors of the temple. He's afraid to tell Eli what he has heard. But once again Samuel is called, this time by Eli. And once again (for the fifth time) he answers, "Here I am" ("Behold, me!") And to his credit, Eli demands to know the truth and he accepts the truth even though it is agonizing.

Novelist Pat Conroy was once asked how he found "the courage to be so raw and revealing in his writing." He said, "It was an accident at first, I didn't realize how many people would be hurt. When I wrote *The Boo*, it was The Citadel, they banned the book. *The Water Is Wide* hurt the city of Beaufort. *The Great Santini* hurt my entire family. But if I didn't tell the truth the way I saw it, I wasn't worth anything as a writer." (Pat Conroy, *A Lowcountry Heart*, 218.)

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The truth hurts and God's good news is often first experienced as bad news, because of the painful difference between right and wrong, good and evil. And our way back to right thinking and right behavior requires raw humility and aching change. But, as Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."

The story ends, as you know, by telling us that Samuel grows up, and God is with him, allowing none of his words to "fall to the ground." And he becomes known as a trustworthy prophet of God.

On this Sunday before we celebrate the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. this story of Samuel, Eli, and his sons is instructive for our lives as Christians. We are not the extraordinary prophets that Samuel and Martin Luther King were. But as Christians we are all called to be prophetic. Maybe you could say we are ordinary prophets. That is we are all called to speak God's truth as we know it with modesty and with courage. Modesty because God's truth is absolute, but our comprehension of that truth is always finite and flawed. Courage because it *is* God's truth that changes the world and participates in the movement of God's justice and mercy.

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Like Samuel, part of being prophetic means being open to God's call—"Here I am!" "Behold, me!" And it means listening for God to speak. "Speak, for your servant is listening."

So how do we listen? Probably nothing all that fancy. We don't expect burning bushes or audible voices in the night. Instead, we spend time away from blaring TVs and insistent cellphones. We pray, worship, engage in Christian fellowship, read the Bible (preferably alone and in a group), meditate, and exercise. Doesn't God often seem so sneaky as to speak to us when we are exercising or have just finished exercising?

We also listen for God by hearing a wide range of reputable voices across the political and theological spectrum—liberal, moderate, and conservative. And then we ask what is true and what is spin.

And on this Sunday when we ordain and install new elders, it's worth noting another distinction of being a prophet. A pastor character in one of Marilynne Robinson's novels asks, "How do you tell a scribe from a prophet...? The prophets love the people they chastise..."

(Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, 142.)

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Without love, we can be complainers and crusaders, but we cannot be prophets. And without the mooring of prayer, scripture, worship, and community we will tend to drift into the waters of being shrill, arrogant, and judgmental.

So this week, we welcome and pray for our new elders to be prophetic. And we pray for ourselves to be prophetic as well. Because after we've tried to be open to God's voice, and after we've tried to listen for God's voice, finally we're called to speak God's word as we know it, and that is not easy. As one professor asks, "But who will speak truth to power? Who dares to stand and, by giving voice to the Lord's proclamation, unleash God's power into the affairs of rulers and nations?" (Richard Boyce in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Vol. 1*, 245.) Who indeed, because it is not easy.

Some people do not like being told that the faith community *and* the nation have a responsibility to care for the poor and to make sure poor children have access to decent health insurance. We have a responsibility, as the Bible says, to find a way to welcome the stranger. We also have a responsibility to respect and care for suffering people,

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“our neighbors” says the Bible, and that includes Puerto Rico, and Haiti, and Africa. Some people don’t like that. And some people don’t like being told that the highest elected official in the land needs to repent of his racism and denigration of entire countries and continents. It is not easy to say that, because it makes people upset. So we will need courage to speak the truth in love, because if we didn’t speak that truth in love as we see it, we would be worthless as prophets.

Here I am! Behold, me! At your service. Speak, Lord because your servants are listening. Help us listen even better, Lord. Then make us loving and make us brave, O God! Make us brave! Amen. ©Jeff Paschal