

1 Samuel 3:1-10

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. 2At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 3the 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. 4Then the Lord called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” 5and 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. 6The 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.” 7Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 8The 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. 9Therefore 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. 10Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

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Hi, so nice to meet you. Where are you from? You're not from around here, are you? Where'd you grow up? Where's your family from? What was your mama's last name?

Here in the South, “tribe” can be very important. When we’re getting to know a person, we want to know who they are - not just by way of their own personality and presentation - but according to where - or more importantly - who they come from. And that can be interpreted as judgmentalism (and sometimes it is), but it can also stem from a deep desire for connection. The tribalist tendencies of some southern cultures can just as easily be motivated by exclusion as a desire for inclusion. We want to find out if we know anyone you know, if we were raised with anyone you used to run round with, or, even better, if we might somehow even be related.

When I served a church in the semi-rural town of Chapin, SC, it was discovered that the Koon side of my family had a lot of biological overlap with members of the congregation. One day someone even showed up with a full-fledged family tree tracing my lineage back to the place it intersected with theirs. Although we were only very distantly related, when I left that church, I was calling more people “cousin” than by their first name.

Well, in a very literal sense, the context of the story of Samuel we heard today, was characterized by a system of tribalism. The twelve tribes of Israel - including the offshoot tribes of Ephraim and Manassah - were family groups that spread out to organize themselves to populate the Promised Land. The only tribe that did not have land was the tribe of Levi. They were tasked, not with holding and defending territory, but with keeping and tending to the house of God - the tabernacle - and the rites and rituals performed there in the sight of the Lord.

And it’s there in the tabernacle (also called the temple) that we find Eli, an elderly priest, a longtime servant of God and a leader in Israel, who had spent his life tending to the house of the Lord faithful to his duties and to preserving the traditions handed on to him. One day, Eli gets a helper. not from his own family, who had been raised in and around the temple but an outsider, the boy Samuel. Samuel was new - he had no history there, he was young - in those days, that meant he had no status - and he was, as we southerners might say, “not from around here.”

He may not have had status or connections there in Shiloh, but the scriptures tell us, Samuel was the cherished firstborn of a mother who loved him, the apple of his father's eye, a gift of God, destined not only to bless his family, but eventually the whole people of Israel. And Samuel found himself as a young boy apprenticed to the elderly priest Eli. And as we read in 1 Samuel, he did the work Eli gave him to do, attending to the needs of the temple, but he "did not yet know the Lord."

And in today's story, we hear God calling: "Samuel, Samuel!" Followed by this whole kind of funny back-and-forth of Samuel running to Eli, and Eli sending him back to bed, and after a few rounds of this, Samuel learns that the voice he's hearing is the voice of God, and he learns to answer: "Speak Lord for your servant is listening." This lectionary favorite is the heartwarming tale of a young boy receiving his calling, learning to hear the voice of God, and to begin the process of recognizing when God is at work in his life. And it's tempting to get up here and preach about how we, like Samuel, learn to listen for God's call and discern the voice of God amidst the other voices of the world.

But the more I think about it, the more I realize that in this story, we are not Samuel, we are Eli. The assembled people of God, faithfully committed to the practices and traditions of this congregation, which itself has not been around that long, but is rooted in hundreds of years of Lutheran tradition and even more hundreds of years of Christian faith. We are not Samuel; we are Eli.

When it comes to religion, whether we feel like it or not, we are the insiders, we are the "establishment" Now, that does not mean that we know it all... that doesn't mean that we are perfect at recognizing and responding to the voice of God. We are still learning, we are still growing. But it does mean that we have a responsibility.

As the ones, like Eli, who are more "seasoned" in the ways of God, we have a responsibility to welcome in those who come into our midst, to shepherd those who, like Samuel, are seeking to "know the Lord," to meet them where they are, to hear their story, and to be the conversation partners our neighbors may need to take the next steps in their journey of faith. It also means that we have a responsibility to listen. Today we only read a part of the story of the calling of Samuel (the nice part). When we go back and see what's going on in the larger story, we find that God has a message that's difficult to hear, and it's through Samuel, the "outsider," that God chooses to make it known.

You see, although Eli and his family came from the priestly tribe of Levi, although the blood that ran through their veins could be traced back all the way to Aaron, the brother of Moses, they weren't perfect. In fact, those who were entrusted with the care of the temple of God and his people, were found to be abusing their power and abusing the people. So in comes Samuel: a kid, a newcomer, an outsider...not from the line of Aaron, not even a Levite, but an Ephraimite, from a family who never darkened the door of the temple except on their once-a-year visit to make their offerings to the Lord.

As Eli welcomes him in, guides him in the ways of the Lord, mentors and teaches him to recognize the voice of God, he discovers that the reason Samuel has been sent by God onto this holy ground is to deliver a message: that the abuses by the temple leadership (who were Eli's own sons, by the way) will not stand. God had entrusted the care of his house and his people to this family of Aaronites, and yet, despite their elite pedigree, their actions have betrayed this trust, and that betrayal, at the expense of the faithful, will not be tolerated.

Although Samuel is young and completely inexperienced in the "traditions" his mentor has spent so many years perfecting, Eli listens to him. Eli knows the ways of the Lord well enough to trust that God's word is true, no matter the messenger. This story is not about God speaking through church people; it's about God speaking to the church through people that may arrive from outside of the "tribe."

People who may not look like us - may not dress like us - may not vote like us in a spiritual sense, they may not “be from around here” - they may be exactly who God is working through to deliver a message - no matter how hard it may be to hear - aimed directly at us church people for the expressed purpose of bring us back onto the path of justice and reconciliation. That was the kind of message Samuel was sent to bring: not one of judgment for the sake of being judgy, but judgment against the established religious institution who instead of protecting the most vulnerable were bringing harm to them, who instead of valuing the gifts of God placed in their care were wasting and hoarding them for their own selfish gain.

I don't know why it is, but church people are notorious for fearing what is different, and clinging stubbornly only to what is familiar. But time and time again we hear these stories in scripture, and in life, where it's God's presence in and among the unfamiliar, the outsider, the new, the young that exposes the truth and the need for repentance and reconciliation. May we recognize and embrace our role as the “Eli's” of the world who are OPEN to those God places in our paths, especially the young - open to what they bring to the table, open to the way God is speaking to and through them for the sake of the church and the world. There's a term that's come into popularity in the last couple of years: “gatekeeping,” and colloquially, it's just used to mean keeping something good to yourself. But long before it came into popular parlance, religious people perfected the art of “gatekeeping.”

For some reason, we fall into the tendency of keeping people like us in and people who are not like us out. Of keeping old ways going on and on and on, and keeping new ideas out. Keeping bad habits going, and keeping fresh perspectives out. For some reason the church has persistently lagged behind when it comes to things like respect for God's creation (that's literally like chapter one in the Bible!), welcoming the stranger (I think that's book #3), and loving those who look, speak, act, or love differently than we do. (I cannot believe that some churches are still having debates over accepting gay and transgender believers into the church. God welcomes all. All means all, y'all.) God is active among those we love to judge. God is speaking to our young people. God is at work beyond these walls. And if blind ol' elderly Eli could get on board with it, y'all, we can too.

This past fall, with our Congregational Imagination sessions, we set aside time to talk about where we saw God working among us and where we feel God may be calling us to focus in the future. Since then, your church Council has been reviewing and processing all the input received through conversation, written feedback and survey responses in order to create the next set of five-year vision priorities. You'll hear about these new vision priorities at the Congregational meeting, which will be held two weeks from today, but I wanted to highlight two of our priorities that were clearly indicated in the feedback we heard from you ll which are a focus on **youth** and a focus on **welcome**.

We've already been in preliminary conversation with our synod's Director of Evangelical Mission about preparing our congregation to be more intentionally welcoming of newcomers moving to the Mt. Pleasant area, and what it looks like to be a congregation that is clear that ALL are welcome. And we've heard from members of the congregation and council alike that a focus on children and youth has to be a part of that intentional welcome.

If we want to move forward with a heart for opening our doors and opening our hearts towards newcomers and young people, we have got to watch out for that tendency for church people to become gatekeepers. We are stewards of the greatest gift ever given to humanity: the good news of Jesus revealed by the Word of God. And that gift is not to be hidden under a bushel basket or locked behind red doors, That gift is to be opened... the gift is to BE OPEN to the presence, the activity, and the image of God in all we encounter, regardless of tribe, privilege, or persuasion...to welcome as we ourselves have been welcomed