

THE EYES HAVE IT

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1 Samuel 3:1-10

Samuel is one of the great prophets of ancient Israel. He lived about 1000 BC. He served during the period when Israel was transitioning from being overseen by the judges to being ruled by a single king. When the people demanded a king, Samuel first anointed Saul as king (and that didn't go so well) and then he anointed David.

Samuel's parents were Hannah and Elkanah. We can read about his birth in the first chapter of the book of 1 Samuel. Elkanah had two wives—Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had children but Hannah did not. Peninnah mercilessly mocked Hannah for not having children. Elkanah loved Hannah and told her not to worry about it. But she did.

One year, Elkanah took his family on their annual pilgrimage to the temple at Shiloh. During the festival, Hannah sneaks away to the sanctuary so that she might offer a prayer and ask for a child. The priest, Eli, observes this woman fervently praying and assumes she is drunk. He orders her to leave the temple. She explains her reason for being there and he realizes his error and blesses the woman. Upon returning home, Hannah becomes pregnant and gives birth to Samuel. Because of her promise to Eli at the temple, when the boy is old enough she offers him to the Lord and leaves him in the care of Eli to be raised as a priest. She visits her son frequently.

Our reading for this week begins when Samuel is still a boy. Samuel is an apprentice priest and Eli is his mentor. Tradition says that he was eleven years old. He lives at the temple compound at Shiloh.

One night when it was late and Samuel was lying in his bed in the temple, God calls to him saying, *Samuel, Samuel*. Samuel logically assumes that the voice belongs to Eli so he runs to Eli and says, *Here I am, for you called me*. Eli tells the boy, *I didn't call you. Go back to bed*. And so Samuel does.

A second time, Samuel hears his name and he goes to Eli and says, *Here I am*. Again, Eli says, *I did not call you. Go back to bed*.

A third time Samuel hears his name and again he goes back to Eli. This time Eli figures out that there is something unusual going on here and he suspects that it may be God calling the boy. So Eli instructs Samuel saying, *Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'* Samuel obeys Eli and returns to his bed.

A fourth time, the Lord comes and calls to Samuel as before and Samuel responds saying, *Speak, for your servant is listening.*

That is the story of the call of Samuel. As a young boy, serving in the temple at Shiloh, God calls out to him. This call, over his lifetime, will lead him to become a great leader of his people, a great prophet. But there is more going on here than just God calling out to Samuel. The underlying substance of the story can be found in the first three verses of our reading. It begins, *Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli.* This we know. But then we are told, *the word of the Lord was rare in those days.* Furthermore, *visions were not widespread.* What a sad statement that is—*the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread.* It would seem that the people are living in a spiritual desert. They are deprived of God's company. We then are informed that the eyesight of Eli the priest has dimmed. Not only are visions sparse, but the eyes of the priest aren't so good either. Is there a connection here? Yes. The one whose job it is to "see" the Lord can no longer see. We will learn later that Eli's sons, whom he has placed in positions of power, are stealing from the temple.

However, all may not be as dismal as it may seem. Despite the darkness, we are informed that the lamp of God had not yet gone out. This lamp would have been an actual lamp in the temple. It was probably lighted each day and burned out during the night as the oil was used up. By telling us that the lamp had not yet gone out, the writer is describing the approximate time that these events in the temple take place. But, the writer is also reassuring us that God is still active and present. The lamp of God still burns. The ark of God, which was the container housing the tablets of the Ten Commandments, was kept in the temple. It was considered to be God's throne on Earth. By pointing out that the lamp of God still burned, the writer is letting us know that God is there.

It is in the temple on this night that God calls Samuel. At this point in his life, Samuel is just an ordinary boy. *Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.* Don't expect Samuel to be a spiritual prodigy. He's just a kid in his apprenticeship to be a priest. When God does call him, he doesn't recognize the voice as belonging to God. He assumes it is Eli. Even the sight-impaired priest can see that God is near.

Today, we are installing church officers—elders and deacons. These fine folk are not officers because they were elected by you (which they were), they are officers because they have been called. Hopefully, they are not simply officers out of a sense of obligation, but out of an invitation by God.

As Presbyterians, we believe strongly in being called. I was called to pastor just as elders and deacons are called to their particular ministries. A call requires that one be called by God as well as the community. An individual may unilaterally declare that they've been called by God. The community, however, may respond and

inform that person, “You may have gotten a call, but we are pretty sure that was a wrong number.” A proper call involves the community and God working together. The way that works in our church is that the congregation elects a nominating committee and through prayer and discernment that group of people seeks those within the congregation who they feel have been called to offices. Occasionally, they choose a name and that person vehemently denies that God has called them. But when both sides agree, we say that person is called.

Installing new officers at the beginning of each year represents a new start in the life of our church—new leadership with new eyes. I want to be very clear here; this does not mean that the outgoing officers have gone blind like Eli the priest. Their eyes are just fine. New eyes sees things differently; they see things that others may miss. New eyes, fresh ears—all of these things working together for the betterment of our church.

I have spoken with each officer and I know that being called is a humbling experience for them. They are anxious about the responsibility they are undertaking. They are never sure they will do a good job. They question whether or not they have truly been called.

But they are good people, and they are not alone. You are here with them. God is with them. Together, we are serving to bring the kingdom into this world.

God calls us to service because God knows us. Last week we looked at Psalm 139 in which the psalmist proclaimed how well God knew him, that God had searched him out and found him, that God knew his actions, his thoughts, his words even before he spoke them, God knows his life before he was even born. God knows us and calls each of us to serve in different ways. We only need to listen.

Is the word of the Lord rare today? Are visions few and far between? For some people, they may be. Some may feel that God is not listening, that God has forgotten them. Some may feel that our systems are broken and people get left behind. There are no guarantees that we will serve in easy days. That is the challenge of serving God. We are called not to keep the church running smoothly. We are called to change that which is broken, to see beyond this world, to bring sight to the blind, good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord.¹ Sometimes this takes us to dangerous places. But we go because we are called.

¹ the Lord's favor