

THE CALL

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

January 14, 2018

Scripture: Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18; 1 Samuel 3:1-19

The call of Samuel and the remarkable story of his enlistment in God's plan to lead Israel into the future is a good story for a season such as this in our congregation and in the nation. It's also not a bad story for us to hear again on this weekend when we remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Probably one of the more familiar stories in the Old Testament is the call of Samuel read just a moment ago. It's a text that gets preached at installation services when new pastors are called and installed. In a sense that aspect of the story is a bit upended since, in our own situation at First Church, at least for the next three months it's still the season of Eli and not quite yet the time of Samuel. The writer tells us that Eli is getting a bit long in the tooth, dim of vision, and with some hearing problems. Samuel is the young turk who will replace Eli, but neither knows that at the outset of today's lesson.

What we do know is that Hannah, Samuel's mother, has had quite a difficult time getting pregnant. She complains to God after years of hoping and waiting to bear a child for her husband Elkanah. One day she has had enough, discouraged and depressed, she pleads her case to the priest Eli. God grants her prayer to bear a child, and does so in abundance. Because in time she gives life to three boys and two girls. And one of the offspring of her much desired fertility is a boy-child named Samuel.

Hannah promises her son Samuel to God, a dedication that's probably unthinkable to almost any parent in the congregation today, but which was not unusual in the time of Hannah and not unusual in certain traditions not our own.

I remember reading an article some years ago in the *New York Review* written by Garry Wills, himself a Roman Catholic, who discussed traditional norms in many Roman Catholic homes. Since birth control was a sin, large Catholic families could spare at least one boy to the priesthood, so, many promises were made by Catholic mothers like Hannah's promise to give her son to the Lord.

So in Hannah and Samuel's case once the boy Samuel was weaned, Hannah took him to Eli for apprenticeship as a nazirite priest.

Now we know, because the author of First Samuel has told us, that Eli the priest had two sons who were no account layabouts. "Corrupt" is the word used in the text. And so the picture emerges of two drop outs who hang out at home living off their dad's money, smoking dope, not serious enough to want to inherit the family business of priestly responsibilities, and expecting their old dad Eli to put food on the table for them nonetheless.

The writer of First Samuel tells us that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days," and with such lazy children coming along in the next generation, taking God for granted, one can understand that the word of the Lord might be rare indeed. It was a morally bankrupt and unpromising season for Israel signified by Eli's sons. So the author of First Samuel implies that authentic prophets were few and far between, or maybe it was that Fake News threatened to distract people from the truth, or spiritual things were not foremost on people's minds. Maybe they just couldn't find a good church to attend. All we know is that the Word of the Lord was rare in those days.

Faith in the time of Eli had grown cold and Eli himself was a part of the problem. Two no account boys stood in line of succession as a priest, and they had no regard for God.

Enter Samuel and the story that we read about a voice in the night that called Samuel's name and that, at first, he mistook for Eli's voice. Three times Samuel hears his name being called and he thinks it's Eli calling him. But Eli is fast asleep and Samuel has to wake him to get his attention.

By the third time, Eli realizes that there is a voice, a presence calling Samuel's name, and Eli tells Samuel to be on the listen for a night visitor.

If he hears the voice again, Eli says, say in return, "Speak, for your servant listens." And that was all the prompting Samuel needed to reboot what he was hearing. God stood before Samuel and told him that he would restore the fortunes of Israel, but that Eli's family would be punished for their disobedience.

Imagine being in Samuel's shoes, that next morning... what to say to Eli... so awkward. Samuel wanted to hide from Eli what he had heard God say... that the days of Eli were numbered. But when Eli insisted that Samuel tell him what God had said, after hemming and hawing a while, Samuel got it out; that the days of Eli's leadership were numbered. And all things considered Eli actually took it pretty well which is indicated in his words to the truth teller, Samuel. "*It is the Lord, let him do what seems good to him.*" And you can hear both the recognition of God's will in Eli's words, and in Samuel's voice the one who would take over as prophet, priest, and judge to Israel.

If you remember your Sunday school lessons you'll remember that God had promised that the house of Eli would have authority *forever*. Everybody, even God, thought it would go on forever. But here, God is going back on a divine promise. So the young upstart Samuel is the sharp edge of God's blade.

In truth, the rise of Samuel is the fall of Eli. And God's condemnation of Eli and his sons is total and shattering. Eli is not all corrupt, but he is not God's choice to lead Israel into the future. His time is ebbing. As the writer of I Samuel tells us "Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord; ...in stature and favor with the Lord and with the people; and *God let none of his words fall to the ground.*" Probably the nicest thing that could be said about a priest, or prophet, or preacher, "God let none of his words fall to the ground." Like Lincoln. Like Dr. King. Like Samuel. His words were memorable.

Now on the face of it, it is a sweet story, these first ten verses of First Samuel 3. Many a seminary graduate who has felt called to ministry has been struck by this story of God calling Samuel's name in the night. And, with any luck, someone serves as an Eli to that Samuel and teaches her or him how to listen to God's voice, and what to say in return.

Sweet night story – old Eli, all too human, a bit of a tyrant as a priest and prophet, aging and dim of vision, now guiding Samuel to be his successor, though neither Samuel nor Eli realizes that at first.

I wish I could say that all calls to ministry were as clear and precise as Samuel's. When I was a member of Long Island Presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry I was always a bit skeptical when a person came to our committee with a story like Samuel's. In the night an unmistakable presence spoke the name of that candidate, and all of us were to bow to that divine intervention. Rack it up to skepticism or weak faith, I was more at home with Elder Norman Boeschen who was plenty skeptical and also encouraging about candidates. A lifelong teacher, and a bit sanguine about sacred communication, he saw the value of the ministry of the laity and did all he could to encourage members of the church to understand their own call to ministry.

Norm had but one question to ask every candidate. "Can't you do God's work and simply be a lay person? What is it about ordination to the ministry that is essential to your calling?"

Of course, Norm Boeschen was ever so Calvinistic in his understanding of vocation. John Calvin, the Protestant voice of our faith believed that every person had a God given life to live and work to fulfill, not just pastors.

Lawyers, doctors, garbage collectors, butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers all had a calling that was theirs and that work was redemptive and created community, and gave dignity to ordinary work by their doing it. I think we have lost that sense of the worth of work we are so materialistic. But Calvin would tell us that we are meant to fulfill a role that has something of God in it more than mammon.

What, after all, would it mean if you had all the money in the world and had no soul, no dignity, no respect for others, no gentleness of spirit, no regard for the integrity of others?

We are all called to such nobility of life, such honor, such kindness in our work, in our play, in our faith, and in every element of our life.

I still have a letter from the former Executive Presbyter of Northwest Missouri Union Presbytery, Rev. Richard Johnson, in which he welcomed me to the ministry of word and sacrament. It was, he said, the highest vocation a man (sic.) could be called to fulfill. And I believed that. I knew in those days that I wanted to love and serve God, and help people. I never had a “Samuel, Samuel” experience in the night. No divine intonation of my name calling me to ministry, but that I wanted to serve God and help people was something I could not leave alone.

Over the years, having served in four wonderful churches, whose people I have come to love, and from whom I have had to say goodbye at some point, I am glad that I have spent my life doing this. I could have been a teacher, perhaps. I could have been a lawyer I suppose, and I thought, and prayed, about both. But ministry was the most compelling of all.

I’ve come to realize, however, in going to and then leaving each of those four congregations that it was not just my call that I was answering. Something else was happening as well. In the same way that by the call of Samuel to serve God, Israel’s calling changed; so too each congregation has changed in the coming and going of my time with them as a pastor. In the times when I have gotten out of the way and sometimes because of what I was doing, God has done what God would do in the life of those congregations. And more than any plan for my life alone, God had a calling for those congregations as well, and I was privileged to be a part of that.

God has something in mind for this church that is beyond these almost seventeen years that we have shared.

If last year’s 300th anniversary celebration has taught us anything it is that a congregation has an identity beyond that of any one pastor, and God has work for that congregation to do that is more than the rising or the ending of any one pastor’s work.

Just as much as I responded to a call to ministry as a young man years ago, and you are challenged to discern your call as God’s servants now. This congregation, through the ending of my call, is itself called to a new future that will be somewhat like, but ultimately very different from these past seventeen years. And your work is to listen for that voice that calls you as a congregation to ventures as yet uncharted, through challenges unknown.

You know when a new pastor is chosen and you begin ministry together, there comes a moment when whatever is past is past and a new future opens before you. I was struck by a friend telling me about exactly that kind of moment as Dr. Martin Luther King began his first pastorate at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. King was 25 years old, finishing a doctorate at Boston University. This was his first call and yet he was no stranger to ministry. His father was a pastor, and his grandfather and his great-grandfather before him had all been pastors. It was the family business, I guess you might say.

Dexter Avenue Baptist Church was founded in 1877 in a former slave traders’ pen just down the street. At the time, it was called the Second Colored Baptist Church. They bought the lot in 1879 and built the church a few years later. Martin Luther King Jr. was the 20th pastor there.¹

The church called King in 1954. After a time of internal tensions, church leaders said they were looking for a noncontroversial pastor who could help restore morale. King arrived with a 34-point plan for the future. Now that’s coming prepared!

One of the first things King did was to change the chancel, something that any pastor knows is the last thing you want to do before the congregation votes you out. The pews which dated from 1888 stayed but Dr. King replaced the pulpit, which was one of the 34 points in his plan.

Now how do you suppose that congregation took that new beginning, looking for someone to calm things down after their internal squabbles? They wanted some nice young pastor, who would not overturn the neatly organized applecart. And King arrived, 25 years old with a 34 point plan for the future, and ideas about changing the chancel.

Samuel's call is not just a call to him alone, but to Israel, to God's people, to the congregation. In the call of Samuel, God is changing and shaping the future not just of Samuel but of all God's people as well. Because when God moves people around in the church, others have to come along and take the wheel and keep the ship moving forward.

I am Eli, now, and my call is ending as your pastor. It is a time for new beginnings. You will ask me what the new life will be like for you, what you should do to prepare for it, how you can be ready and what you should expect.

And I will tell you that I am Eli (without the corrupt sons of course), but you are Samuel. And God is calling both of us on this weekend when we remember Samuel and Dr. King and the new beginning that you and I will be making in the coming weeks.

My prayer for us in what time lies ahead is a prayer from our **Book of Common Worship** that has been an inspiration to me all these years and that is a good place to both end and begin what lies ahead for us.

Eternal God,
you call us to ventures
of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.²

¹ Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2006/01/13/january-13-2006-martin-luther-king-jr-as-pastor/1788/>

² Book of Common Worship, *Morning Prayer* #6. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 1993. p. 501