

# “Voices in the Night”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 18, 2009*

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany

I Corinthians 1:26-31

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I Samuel 3:1-20

The Old Testament book of First Samuel recounts a time in the history of the ancient Hebrew people when, as our text reads this morning, “the word of the Lord was rare; visions were not widespread.” (3:1) Maybe this was because – over the generations – they had settled into their new homes in the Promised Land and prospered so that their need for God has started to wane. Maybe it was because they had become assimilated with the culture that surrounded them and their distinct faith tradition had grown less important.

Whatever the reason, it had apparently become time for a change; a transition from the old way to a new way; away from the old guard – generations of the same family of priests – and to a new generation of leaders. It is into this situation that a boy named Samuel – an unexpected and unlikely recipient of God’s call – assumes the reins and takes the people of Israel in a new direction.

In January of 1993, I was working in Washington, DC when a young President-elect, a member of the “other” party, with little Foreign Relation experience, was sworn into office on a cold Tuesday afternoon. Soon, we were dealing with new people working in the White House, the Justice Department, the Congressional Budget Office and in many other positions. On a whole they were younger, less experienced, but most of all, different. After twelve years of mostly the same Republicans, it was a changing of the guard.

Almost every January since then, I have been working in churches where new deacons and elders have been elected and trained. A new class of confirmands has assembled and has begun to make its journey of learning and discovery. Often there changes in staff, or in who is leading Sunday School, or who is recruiting greeters and ushers. The change brings hope, but also some trepidation. Are the new folks ready, and were the “old” folks ready for there to be new folks taking their place? Does what was done and said in the past still translate to today? How is God speaking and who ought to be listening? How much change is too much change?

*Read I Samuel 3:1-20*

This is a story about receiving God’s call. Among the Israelites, it was one of the most well-known and oft-referenced narratives of the Old Testament for several reasons: first, because of who is involved. Samuel will grow to become one of the most important Jewish leaders of the Old Testament and a model of faithful service to God. As he had been dedicated at birth by his

mother, Hannah, for service to God, he remains – throughout his life – separated from scandals and human agendas which had come to dominate Temple life. Second, because of the way this call takes place: Samuel, sleeping in the Temple, is awakened by what he assumes is the voice of Eli, the priest. But, after this happens three times, Samuel is instructed by Eli to go back to the room and wait – and when he hears the voice again to respond, saying: “speak, for your servant is listening.” Without Eli’s instruction and openness to God speaking in a new way, Samuel could not have heard and responded. And finally, this story is important because it echoes the ways that each of us – ancient Hebrew or modern American – struggle to hear, recognize and understand God’s voice calling us to different forms of ministry today.

This is a story about a boy, Samuel, who receives a special call from God at a particular time and place, but it is a tale that involves many people and spans across the generations. It began with a woman named Hannah, wife of Elkanah, who although she loved her husband very much, was barren and had no children. Out of her desperation, she wept and prayed that if God would provide her a son, she would set him apart by dedicating the boy to the service of God – sending him to live at the Temple and train to become a priest.

In Hannah’s mind, God saw her tears and heard her prayer and provided her with the son she so wanted, whom she named Samuel and surrendered to the service of God. Later, Hannah was blessed with five more children. But, Samuel – with his mother’s blessing and support – grew and learned under the tutelage of Eli: the elderly priest whose eyes had started to grow dim.

As he grew older, Samuel would have begun to help out around the Temple, doing some of the jobs that Eli was no longer able to perform. At about fifteen years of age, Jewish boys could begin to take on priestly responsibilities; although at that point they were mostly menial tasks. That is why young Samuel was sleeping in the Temple that night: it was apparently his job to make sure that the lamps around the inner sanctum did not go out.<sup>1</sup>

It’s not uncommon that a young apprentice to an experienced mentor would be given basic tasks to perform in order to both help out while hopefully also soaking in the important traits of reverence and faithfulness from their elders. The same is true today in many religious orders where novices assist the older clerics, biding their time until they are mature enough to assume leadership. In most faith traditions, experience and seniority count for something, and in Christian congregations, it is no different.

Any system of seniority must involve a plan of succession: eventually bringing the next generation into positions of leadership. The ideal situation takes place when elders have the time and opportunity to teach their values and traditions in a way they can be understood by members of the younger generation. With an apprentice-mentor relationship like we read about in Samuel, the transmission and translation of these faith values can offer continuity and stability.

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<sup>1</sup> William Powell Tuck in *Lectionary Homiletics*, January 2000.

But as we know, and as the story of Samuel re-confirms – the transmission of values and traditions from one generation to the next does not always go the way that we expect. Eli’s two sons, who also served as priests at the Temple, had been taught the right words to say and rituals to perform, but they failed to receive their father’s appreciation for the holiness of God. We are told that their immorality has become an affront to God because, instead of ministering to the needs of others and inspiring reverence, Eli’s two sons dishonored their priestly vows and took advantage of their office at the expense of others.

Samuel therefore offers a new symbol of hope for Eli that his own sons failed to provide: that someone in the next generation of leadership would listen for God’s voice and respond to the Lord’s leading with obedience and faithfulness. This surely was not the way that Eli anticipated the faith would be passed on, but after his own sons refused the lessons he taught them, God was now providing a new – and unlikely – person to carry on the tradition.

As we can see from history, from scripture, and from our own lives, traditions have not only been passed on through unlikely recipients, but significant changes usually take place in the midst of the transition. Such is the case here as well: for the message that Samuel receives from God does not bode well for Eli and his sons. So unpleasant is the news that Samuel, when he awakens the next morning, is reluctant to repeat it to his mentor.

It is only with the help of the old priest that young Samuel was able to interpret the voice that he hears in the night. By example and instruction, Eli shows Samuel the virtues of patiently waiting and listening for God to speak. Samuel, despite being limited to simple tasks around the Temple, was nevertheless in a location and state of mind where he could receive this call. Before anyone would have supposed that he was ready, God chose Samuel to receive the message and assume greater responsibilities. Eli had taught Samuel all that he knew about tradition and scripture, but God chose to give the message to the unlikely one, the young one. And the good news is that God continues to choose young and unlikely and seemingly unprepared people to serve, meaning that God does and will continue to speak.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past sixteen years, since I left Washington DC later on in 1993, I have worked in large and small churches, urban and suburban, Presbyterian, Lutheran and Methodist, historic and newer churches. In all of those places, I have yet to be part of a congregation that doesn’t struggle with to translate and transmit the faith from one generation to the next. Usually, it does not happen when or how we would expect. There are differing expectations regarding program priorities, time commitments, giving levels, use of facilities and maintenance of buildings. There are translation problems in trying to speak across generational and cultural divides. And there are sure to be accomplishments from older generations that can never be duplicated as well as failures that are certain to be repeated.

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<sup>2</sup> William Willimon, “God Bridges the Generation Gap.”

Gil Rendle, a church consultant who wrote the book *The Multi-Generational Church*, visited our Presbytery several years ago to help churches in trying to address these types of issues. He encourages congregations to talk about how people's differing expectations can be better understood and new solutions imagined before conflicts escalate. He also encourages individual Christians to discover where in the church they are called to work toward creative answers by serving as a bridge: whether between different age groups, or cultures, or areas of service, or theological perspectives; to span some gap which might day grow into a chasm.<sup>3</sup>

Congregations today, as they were back in Samuel's time, are multi-generational. Some within the older generations are looking for new ways to teach, encourage and inspire some new leaders to take on responsibilities in the church, like Eli did. Some of the church's young people struggle to work and grow and remain faithful like Samuel. There are other people, young and not-as-young alike who wonder why they have been dealt a particular hand in life; they yearn to hear God speak although it seems as if visions are not widespread.

In response to the needs and challenges of God's people, the voice of the Lord does call people to particular ministries within congregations and beyond: to be pastors, elders, deacons, teachers, lay leaders, musicians, drivers, ushers, money counters, even – as a legacy of Samuel – candle-lighters. God is calling people to be both bearers of the tradition and agents of change in the church as well as to be bridges within their faith communities.

This is not always an easy role to take on: there are bound to be differing expectations, difficulties with effective translation, and ever-shifting priorities. But, God has called Christians to take on these challenges and live together as communities of faith that are intentionally and truly multi-generational. As God's people, we are called to listen for God's voice, to watch for God acting in unexpected places and unlikely people. For us, the voices in the night should be telling us that holiness and tradition matter, but that in the dawn, only the full truth will do.

Following the advice of his mentor, Samuel went back into the Temple's inner sanctum and said: "speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Eli, knowing that God had chosen to speak a new message to his apprentice, was able to swallow his pride and hear God's voice through the mouth of the next generation. And together, they helped to usher in a re-creation of the tradition that was fit for a new day.

On the eve of the inauguration of a new administration, at the dawn of a new year in this church with new leaders in new roles, at the outset of a new confirmation journey for eight of our young people, may God bless us all with ears to hear and eyes to see. May God provides us with the faithfulness and imagination to discern and follow God's will for us: the places where we can be a bridge from one day to another, from one neighbor to the next. May it be for us and for the church and for the nation on this and every day. AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> Gil Rendle, *The Multi-Generational Church*.