

Sunday, January 22, 2017

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1 Samuel 3:1-10

INTRODUCTION:

Roughly one thousand years before Christ, a young boy named Samuel was born to a woman named Hannah, who brought him to live with an important, elderly priest named Eli so that her son would be raised in service to God. You see Eli was the priest of the sacred shrine at Shiloh where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Eli was happy to train up the boy Samuel because his own two sons had turned out badly. They were champions of priestly corruption and dishonorable beyond hope. Shiloh had been turned away from all holiness and reverence for God, and as a result God had become silent, leaving the people to their own depravity. What is there to say if no one is listening? So Eli placed his last flicker of hope for the redemption of Israel in the little boy Samuel, and here is how it began.

Hear the words of first Samuel, chapter 3...

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

For the past 2 weeks we have been looking at scripture as kind of a road map that might chart a course for TriCon church as we evolve through a time of change. In between every ending and beginning, there is a period of time called “the neutral zone”.¹ This is always a time of fluidity when the steady current of relied upon systems and comfortable ways of navigating through the day to day meets with a new flowing stream. Things have changed. The river churns differently and is not the same as it was before the ending - but the flow has yet to settle into what new current is emerging. This is at best a bumpy period of time, and at worst terrifying. This “neutral zone” has been described as that uncomfortable - in between place - like being between trapezes. It’s like Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There’s nothing to hold on to”.² And so, in the neutral zone it’s often good to have a plan and direction. We’ve called our plan EVOLVE 2017.

On January 8th we looked at how the act of Baptism can actually be seen as a re-creation story that remembers the Exodus story, when God delivered Israel through water to the Promised Land. I spoke about the importance of remembering our stories because they inform us about how we have come to behave and function (or not) in the system that we are currently a part of. There is a strong connection between memory and hope. Remembering our story and the story of those who have gone before us has the power to awaken and even frame our most profound hope for the future. The story we tell ourselves about the past is the story we continue to build upon in the future.

Last week, we studied the need for repentance, not as some tent revival rhetoric of “turn or burn” threat by an angry GOD attempting to strong arm us into heaven but rather an invitation to see differently, to change our minds about assumptions and perhaps recalculate our spiritual GPS and reorient our direction. Michele Forinash told a compelling story of repentance and redemption that illustrated this idea beautifully. You can find it on our sermon podcast or download the transcript on our website.³

As we remember who we have been and examine who we are today, it will be important to open to the possibility that maybe there are things we might want to let go of that are holding us imprisoned and we need to reorient ourselves to imagine what God dreams for our future together.

Today, we look at how we might discern which way the wind of the Spirit of God is blowing in our congregation and community. After all, if you are in denial, how do you know it? How do we position ourselves to open to all that might be possible?

¹ *Transitions* by William Bridges

² Marilyn Ferguson

³ www.triconchurch.org/sermons

In first Samuel we read the story of a community that had simply just forgotten how to listen to God. It wasn't even on their radar. As Mary Jane said, the old priest Eli's sons, who were supposed to be the one's nurturing the spiritual life of the community had turned in the wrong direction. Scripture flat out says, "Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord."⁴ But God will always finds a way, even if we feel separated from God, that does not mean that God is separated from us. So here we have this little toddling acolyte Samuel bumbling about the temple shrine at Shiloh as innocent and free as any young monk could be. You see Samuel was a blank canvas. And finally he gets the message that this is God calling him, not the old blind priest. And Samuel replies with child-like wonder. "*Speak, for your servant is listening.*"

What I learn from that story is that to hear the voice of God I must put myself into a quiet, listening position. I must become a blank canvas. Perhaps Samuel could hear the voice calling in the night because his head wasn't filled with grown up, mature presumptions and fixed theologies about how God works. He was too young to be convinced of his unworthiness and too innocent to be guided by perceived limitations and legitimate fears. I know that when I perceived a call to go to seminary at 50 years old I didn't simply say, "Speak, for your servant is listening." I said, "This can't possibly be right. I have a family to feed. I'm not very bright. I'm too old." But, Samuel was simply open to the experience. Eli, the elder theologian, was in the same room and didn't hear a thing.

There's another story about the colorful prophet Elijah. Poor Elijah was fleeing for his life because he had been loudly speaking God's truth to power. He was holed up in a remote cave on the side of mountain, seeking the nearness of God when all of a sudden a very powerful wind came and caused landslides, but God was not in the wind, then an earthquake followed and after that a fire blazed, but God was not in the earthquake or the fire. After all the chaos and drama though, scripture says there was a soft, quiet whisper, and God passed by.

It seems to me that to discern God's call and will for us we must free ourselves of fear and catastrophe. We must put ourselves in a position to quietly listen. We must be still before God and give our entire attention to what God is doing right now. This is not a one-time thing to sooth the discomfort of the neutral zone but a life long practice. Jesus told his disciples to listen, to pay attention, to be entirely present to what God is doing right now. "Let anyone with ears listen."⁵ And also the Psalmist encourages us. "Today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts."⁶

⁴ 1Samuel 2:12

⁵ Matthew 13:43

⁶ Psalm 95:7-8

However God is calling us, we should not be concerned about our age or abilities. God is well acquainted with our weaknesses, but also knows our heart and potential. God has a much better perspective than we do on what we can become when we answer the call.

People of God, as we navigate between what was and what will be, we need not let anxiety drive us. The blanket will come out clean and warm from the drier. And as we wait between trapezes, let us humbly sit quietly, listen deeply, and speak boldly what we hear, not only before God but also before one another. Samuel and Elijah are two of many stories in scripture that teaches us that discerning God is not dependent what so ever on our cleverness, organization, or perceived strengths and weaknesses. Discernment comes in God's time. We are simply to wait humbly and notice what patterns of Grace are revealed to us when we dare to listen and respond in faith.

So let us dwell together in this neutral zone, anticipating that we will find our way to the next beginning as we remember, repent, and reveal God's future.