

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON
Here We Are

INTRODUCTION

1 Samuel 3:1-10

There was once an old, wise priest named Eli. He was raising Samuel and teaching him the ways of God. Samuel is still just a boy when he first hears the voice of God calling to him. Hear the word of God from the book 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 Eli 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 Eli 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.'

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The Word of God for the people of God...

I often feel limited by how firmly I trust my own point of view. It's like the guy who is lost in the wilderness and eventually finds himself at the edge of a deep wide river. Across the water on the far bank he spies a man walking along with his dog. The guy yells across at the man, "Hey fella, how do I get to the other side?" The man looks up and down the river, stares at his shoes for a minute then responds, "Best I can tell, you are on the other side." It's all point of view.

Samuel first responded to God's call from within his own experience until Eli told him to try something different and it was then that his amazing adventure with God began.

Let us pray,

*Open our ears, our God,  
that we might hear your Word speaking to us in this moment.  
Open our ears that we might listen for your voice calling to us through  
scripture.  
Open our ears, our God,  
that we might understand your promises to followers old and young,  
ancient and modern.  
Open our hearts, our God, that we might enter into the love you offer us.  
Amen.*

My first class in seminary was the "Hebrew Scriptures". My professor, the Reverend, Doctor, Greg Mobley assigned us the task of putting together a timeline of the various historical events as listed in the Bible and other historical sources. In the spring of 2005 this seemed a silly exercise to me because all of this information was readily available on the Internet. Why was I buying poster board and colored markers to make some kind of grammar school presentation? I was resentful and resistant but followed through anyway. After hours and hours of study, research, and poorly sketched line drawings I stepped back and looked at my ten-foot long exhibition. It had all the flair and clarity of a 5<sup>th</sup> grade presentation. But, I will never forget being stunned at what I saw through the smudged lines and awkwardly drawn grid. I don't think I would have ever noticed this had I not done the exhaustive work on my own. There before me was a clear pattern of the Hebrew people's march through history. I saw clearly how their overall condition rhythmically rose and fell with mathematical regularity. The graph looked like a roller coaster. Years of peace and prosperity declined predictably in to years of oppression and violence. I then looked closer at the events that were critical to the rise and fall of the society and noticed that as the Hebrew people drew

closer to God and relied more heavily on obeying God's laws, their conditions flourished. But as they separated from righteous behavior and started doing things like worshiping golden calves or misusing their privileged position, the decline would begin. In every single instance of decline I saw a line pop up from the graph indicating the rise of a prophet. These were men and women who heard the voice of God and reflected back to the people how they had gone wrong and also how they might find their way back into God's presence. The prophets didn't really predict the future but rather pointed to the inevitable results that would come from either continuing along the same declining path or repenting and changing direction. Prophets held up a mirror to the current society and also helped the people look beyond the current calamities and fears. They were visionaries that proclaimed an unvarnished truth of what was and also, more importantly, imagined what might be possible. Where average people might be resigned to prescribed limits, visionaries saw possibilities for greater things.

It's like when I was a teenager and discovered this new book on farming with all of these advanced techniques to optimize healthy crops. I eagerly brought it to my grandfather who had taught me so much about his farming. He lit his pipe, looked out across the field and said, "I don't need a new book, I already know more about farming than I'm willing to do now."

Sometimes we say we want to know God's will for our lives when the fact is we are not willing to simply act on what we already know. Our hearts and minds are stuck in our own point of view. Prophets revealed the next part of a map that Divinely directs us along a certain path. "Where is the rest of the map?" we might ask, and God responds, "I'll give you that part when you get to the end of this part."

You may think of prophets as ancient mythological characters with long gray beards and angry dark eyes, shaking their walking sticks and yelling like mad men in the public square but who might be the prophets in modernity? I think of Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, but also I think of visionaries like Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, and even Bernie Sanders. Think about how much things have changed in the past 10 years—wireless internet, smart phones, Instagram and Twitter—and I can't even imagine how vastly different things will be in 2027, or even 2100. I think of climate change and people like Bill McKibben, our own Jim Antal and many of you. I think of Black Lives Matter and Reverend Tracy Blackmon. Prophets

and visionaries are not just Old Testament myths; they are all around us today.

I was reminded about my seminary time line as I read today's scripture that chronicles the initial call of a pivotal prophet. I wondered what the conditions were. Samuel was just a little kid under the mentorship of an old priest who was largely tired and generally defeated. When I studied the context I noticed that the culture during Eli's tenure as chief priest had been in steady decline. The provocative Scripture is found right in verse 1: *"The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."* Visions were rare because there was rampant corruption in the church. Evil, hatred and exploitation permeated not only the religious institution but also the wider culture. So it makes sense. Why would God show up if nobody were looking? Why speak if nobody's listening? It made me think of our contemporary world because I would say that the word of the Lord seems rare today and visions perhaps are not so widespread. But how many of us are really open to hearing God's call?

I believe that God is showing up and also very much still speaking. But we need to watch, listen and pray. It's so easy to be distracted away from God's voice and vision for us. We so easily limit ourselves and give into fears, busy schedules and immediate concerns. We easily give in to our feelings of inadequacy and inability to make any real difference, or like my grandfather, already know more than we are willing to do. But we see something remarkable and different in Samuels' call. God isn't a bit concerned about his age or ability. God knows his weaknesses but also his potential. God knows what Samuel can become.

So here we are TriCon Church, seeking our vision from God, in a time and place where the word of the Lord is rare and visions are not so widespread. Yet God knows our heart and our potential. Are we truly open to God's leadership here? Are we willing to follow God's vision for us—even before we know the whole story? If so, then God will form us into visionaries, to achieve new vistas of faith, bold acts of justice and wildly abundant displays of extravagant mercy.

We are all capable of being prophets and visionaries that see beyond what is today into the vast possibilities that lie ahead. I am very convinced that God has plans for us. All we need do is listen, and a good beginning is with Samuel's prayer. "Here we are Lord, speak, for your servants are listening." - AMEN