

1 Samuel 3:1–20

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.

2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 3 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. 4 Then the Lord called, “Samuel! Samuel!” [a] and he said, “Here I am!” 5 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.

6 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.” 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

8 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. 9 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.

10 Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” 11 Then the Lord said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. 12 On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 13 For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. 14 Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.”

15 Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. 16 But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” He said, “Here I am.” 17 Eli said, “What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.” 18 So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.”

19 As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. 20 And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

Sermon: Idolatrous Religion

We open with a story of Samuel and Eli. ‘The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.’ At this point in Israel’s history there were no more pillars of fire, no columns of smoke, no parting of seas or rivers. As we continue to read the book of Samuel we see that it is a worldly history of martial successes, defeats, and palace intrigue. The book of Samuel describes the period in which Israel moved from being a society led by judges who were empowered and inspired by God during times of crisis – God’s representatives, so to speak – to being a nation ruled by an earthly king, much like the other nations around them.

It was young Samuel who, once grown, anointed the first king of Israel – King Saul - and who later anointed David.

There are some rather striking parallels between Samuels time and our time. We are also in a period where we are moving from religious rule to secular. While we have never in this country had a theocracy – we were never ruled by God directly or by a priest acting in the name of God, certainly in this country for much of its history Christian values formed the basis of our culture and were evident in our laws.

For example, when I was a child, stores were closed on Sundays. As an entire nation we observed the Sabbath. That isn’t to say that everyone spent the day in thoughtful, thankful prayer, but it illustrates that our laws were heavily influenced by the Christian Bible.

As I grew up I witnessed the rejection of the Sabbath restrictions on commerce – everything is open on Sundays now - also the disappearance of prayer from schools, and the removal of the Bible from the courtroom. Laws on abortion, prostitution, and marriage have been struck down, in some cases no new legislation was created to replace what was removed, which leaves some areas of the law a bit like the wild west – no real guidelines and certainly no enforcement.

Each one of these topics that I’ve just mentioned are complicated, as we learned yesterday in our discussions of what constitutes a godly marriage. So, without debating the morality of any of these subjects, I bring them up only to illustrate that this current age is a transitional age. We are moving from being a culture steeped in biblical customs and traditions to being a secular culture.

We are replacing prophets and judges with kings.

We are also in an age of diminished miracles. No pillars of fire, no parting of seas. That isn’t to say that miracles don’t happen, it’s just that most people don’t believe in them anymore.

This is a great time to let you know that I have a friend who, in early December, visited a number of specialists about a golfball-sized lump under her arm, and another in her breast.

A group of us prayed for her. The next week the group met again to pray. When she arrived for her MRI appointment the doctor could find nothing to scan. There were no lumps, no growths. Nothing. It was all gone.

In her words 'I looked at the doctor. The doctor looked at me. Neither one of us had any idea what to say.'

She had been healed. The doctors can't explain what happened to that growth, and neither can my friend. All we know is that we prayed and something happened. It was a miracle that I consider myself blessed to be allowed to witness. That was last month – I've already seen God at work this month in different people.

Despite events like this, for most people, the age of miracles has passed. Much like in the time of Samuel's calling, we are moving from a God centered society to a human centered society.

The word of the Lord is rare in these days; visions are not widespread. And yet the lamp of God has not gone out. Visions may be rare, but they still happen. Miracles seem harder to come by, and yet they are all around us.

Like Samuel, we are sleeping. Because our eyes are closed we don't sense the divinity that surrounds us. We follow the lead of our culture, striving for more and more; bigger house, better job, longer vacation, nicer car. We seek status in the eyes of our peers, and since we're all trying to outdo each other there is no rest, and there is no attainment. Once we reach a goal the next one becomes visible and so we cannot stop. Exhaustion has so dulled our hearts, minds, and souls that we become like Eli, working all day in the temple, yet never hearing the voice of God.

Eli was supposed to be a man of God. He was the High Priest of the Temple – he was *the* man of God. And yet, he doesn't come across as terribly godly.

As the book of Samuel opens we are introduced to Samuel's mother who was barren. She was in the temple praying that God would bless her with a child and when Eli saw her he tried to toss her out, accusing her of being a drunk, when in reality she was a desperate woman filled with sorrow and grief.

Again, a reminder that those days were much like these days – many times we also find ourselves judging those who come to the church in desperation.

Back to our story. God did answer Hannah's prayer and a son was born. She named him Samuel, which means God has heard, and in gratitude she dedicated her son to God, which is how he ended up in Eli's care, being trained as a priest.

God had in mind that Samuel would become a different sort of priest than Eli. We've already heard that Eli wasn't terribly pastoral when faced with hurting people. It also turns out that Eli wasn't very good at raising his sons either.

Eli's sons were scoundrels, says the bible, with no regard for God or for their responsibilities. Instead of performing their priestly functions, the boys spent their time gorging themselves on meat that was supposed to be sacrificed to the Lord, and sleeping with the women who tended to the tents that made up the temple.

Eli did try to correct them, but didn't try very hard. It seems that, like many of today's parents, Eli was more concerned with being liked by his kids than in administering some badly needed discipline.

Eli was a pretty negative example of religious leadership; harsh and judgmental to those he was supposed to minister to, and allowing his sons, the next generation of priests, to use their appointed office for personal gain and sexual satisfaction. And in this morning's story Eli is found in his room while Samuel, the acolyte, is in the temple. In every sense of the word Eli seems absent from his duties.

Eli represents everything that people complain about in his generation and in ours about 'the church.' He is the embodiment of the common trope of the church as a self-serving, corrupt, jaded organization that is riddled with sexual impropriety and entitlement.

He is an example of what happens when the church becomes an idol. That may seem unduly harsh, but if we consider that an idol is anything that becomes more important than God in our lives, then it makes a little more sense.

Jesus summarized the commandments into two: love God and love our neighbour. Church buildings can become idols if they consume so much of our resources that we have to cut our mission work and so stop loving our neighbours. Buildings become idols when they are so beautiful and ornate that we can't let people in freely because they might break something.

When we hold onto our past, our programs, and our worship styles past their due dates we turn them into idols. Unhealthy fixation on 'the way things are done' can get in the way of God. Church idolatry happens when propriety becomes more important than proclamation.

This is what Eli represents. If there was any doubt about this, just look at his name. El-i is the possessive declension of God. His name means 'my God.' The writers of the bible were not without humour.

Remember Jesus on the cross? *Eli Eli lama sabachthani*. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

So, every time that Samu-el (there's that *e/* again – God has heard. Isra-el, God will prevail), every time Samuel went running to Eli he addressed this corrupt human being as 'my god.'

Think of that image for a moment – each time the true God calls, the young innocent one goes running to his religious leader and says 'my god, my god; you called?'

You might now be thinking that this sermon is meant to be a condemnation of the church, or of the way we think of church. That isn't the case. But this episode with Eli and Samuel is meant to be a warning for us; that we can't become complacent. Eli stopped serving God and instead served his office.

Lacking divine inspiration, he became jaded and his sons ran out of control; corruption took the place of grace and instead of finding liberation in the temple the people instead found condemnation and bitterness.

This is why God had to cut off Eli and his line, and to raise up Samuel as a successor instead. To this point we might see this as a story of the new supplanting the old, and indeed in a worldly tale this would be the message – the old becomes stale and needs to be replaced by the new.

But, our God who is constantly renewing and recreating does not work in that way. Although Eli had allowed his sons and his role in the temple to become more important than his relationship with God, that is, idolatrous, God still had use for Eli.

As God called and raised up Samuel he allowed Eli a chance to participate in this new thing he was doing. Samuel was young and filled with passion – we see his dedication in that while Eli was sleeping in his room Samuel was lying in the temple, near the ark of the Lord.

Samuel was obedient. Three times he was called, and three times he got up. Samuel didn't ignore the call after the second or third false alarm. Samuel was dutiful.

But Samuel didn't know the Lord. He didn't recognize the voice that was calling him. He kept running to his false idol – his master, Eli. We cannot have two masters, though – only one.

This set the stage for a redemptive moment for Eli. The third time that Samuel came to him in the middle of the night Eli had the wisdom to redirect Samuel's attention away from himself to the true God.

Finally Eli discovered his purpose – the role of clergy is to point to the one true God. It's not primarily about the rituals, the liturgies, or the building. These easily become distractions. Eli used his wisdom to help Samuel into a relationship with God.

Though Eli is painted in a poor light, in this story God uses him to good ends. It took both the authority of this failing priest and the obedience of his young protégé to bring God's plan into being. The young and the old each have contributions to make to enact heaven's kingdom.

The only question left is 'am I Eli or am I Samuel?'

I think that we are each a bit of both. I know that there are times that I am a Samuel, full of energy and intention but lacking in discernment and understanding.

At other times I am Eli, fighting to protect the old guard way of doing things, defending the status quo because it is less risky than trying something new.

Earlier I said that our age has some similarities to Eli's. We are moving from religious rule to secular. We are trading our prophets for parliamentarians. The face of society is changing, and so is the face of our church. God is doing a new thing.

As we try to listen to the call of God to determine what that new thing is and what our role in it is to be we need all of us to listen together. We need all our Samuels to prompt us to action in a new direction. We need all our Eli's to offer counsel based on the wisdom of experience.

Right now we have need of both passion and caution; action and contemplation. The lamp of God has not gone out, and we have work to do.