

June 2nd, 2024

1 Samuel 3:1-20 “Your Servant is Listening”

Okay, last week we were studying the book of Isaiah with the hope of answering the question, “What does it take to be a prophet?” I turned it into, “What does it take for a church to be engaged in prophetic ministry?” How do we, as a worshipping congregation here in Chico, speak truth to power? How do we help people choose a pathway that aligns with God’s way? How do we connect people to God? And how do we show people who are already connected to God how to stay tethered to God? The conclusion was that we need to be willing, like Isaiah, to say, “Here I am, Lord.” And we also have to be willing to immerse ourselves in scripture and allow God to remove our preconceived notions about how *we* think things ought to be. This process involves refinement, and in Isaiah’s case, the vision of the refining process came in the form of a burning coal that touched his “unclean” lips. Only then could Isaiah’s words be truly prophetic. So, let’s put what we learned last week into practice and look at some examples in the Bible where people are called to prophetic ministry.

The Word this week comes from the book of 1 Samuel which, if you remember, we studied back in 2022. It’s the origin story of how the nation of Israel went from being a loose federation of tribes to a monarchy. You might be thinking, “Heck of a time to be bringing this up considering everything that’s happening in that part of the world these days!” Yes. Yes, it is. And I’m going to blame the lectionary because *it* directs us to 1 Samuel for the next few weeks. I was having a friendly debate with a fellow minister in town about using the lectionary. He does not use the Lectionary. He values the freedom of choosing his own scripture readings from week to week. Me? I use the lectionary 90% the time. I enjoy having a resource that I can blame when I preach on controversial topics. “Good grief, pastor, what is wrong with you preaching about the rise of Israel during a week when Israel bombed innocent civilians?” “Hey, I’m just following the lectionary. Otherwise, I’d be preaching from Mark, Philippians or Job.”

Last week we read the story of Isaiah who received a very clear and incredible vision from God about how he was to preach to a divided nation whose lips were “unclean.” This took place 700 years before Christ when the kingdom of Israel was divided and in danger of being invaded by neighboring nations. This divided nation was not in alignment with God by any stretch of the imagination. Our text this week took place 600 years earlier when Israel was a loose federation of tribes ruled by regional Judges. Some of the coolest stories in the Old Testament were about super-heroic Judges like Gideon, Deborah, and Samson. This past week I had to explain Sunday School to a person who didn’t grow up in the church. I said, “It’s where we teach our kids the basics of our faith by using the stories of our faith.” And of course, I had to tell her about the best part of Sunday School aside from Rice Krispy treats. I told her about flannel boards. She said, “What are flannel boards?” Oh, my word! A flannel board is an educational tool for budding little comic book artists to lay out the week’s Bible story on a panel, usually attached to an easel, using little pre-drawn cut-out characters that stuck to the board when you placed them there. If you were a good kid in Sunday School and could recite the scripture of the week from memory, you might be chosen to lay out a story on the flannel board! Genius educational tool. The Old Testament ones were the best. The New Testament ones weren’t very exciting. It was hard to appreciate, “Jesus preaches the sermon on the mount” when there was, “Samson massacres an army of Philistines using the jawbone of a donkey!”

But not all judges were as awesome and super heroic as Samson. In this week’s scripture, we are introduced to a half-blind priest named Eli who served as a judge in the city of Shiloh. He was Samson’s successor. Eli’s family was a dysfunctional mess. His two sons were abusive and rebellious and died in a failed attempt to defend the Ark of the Covenant from Philistine raiders. When Eli received the news that his sons died and that the Ark had been stolen, he fell off his chair, broke his neck and

died. I don't remember learning about Eli in Sunday School, and I seriously doubt there's a flannel board kit for his story, but who knows?

We also get to meet Samuel this week. Samuel was a boy whose mother, Hannah dedicated her son to Eli's care. Samuel became a servant of Eli. One night Samuel heard a voice calling his name. He thought Eli was calling him from the next room, but when he went to Eli and said, "Here I am!" Eli said, "I didn't call you. Go back to bed." This happened two more times, and finally Eli figured out that it must have been God who was calling Samuel. So Eli said, "Next time you hear a voice calling your name say, 'Speak, your servant is listening!'" When the voice called again, Samuel did what Eli told him, and sure enough, it *was* the Lord. Wow! That's a great thing, right?

Well ... here's the first lesson for the morning: Just because God is calling you doesn't mean that God has something fun planned for you. God tells Samuel, "I'm about ready to do something that is going to make your ears tingle." God then tells Samuel that he is going to play a part in the downfall of the house of Eli. And this scares Samuel because Eli had taken him in and cared for him when his own mother couldn't. Samuel had so much gratitude for Eli, and now he's supposed to support God's plan to terminate Eli's tenure as Judge? Samuel was afraid to tell Eli about what God said, but Eli insisted. That's when Samuel told Eli that his time as Judge was coming to a tragic end. But instead of being upset, Eli just said, "Well, I guess I should let God do what God needs to do." Eli affirmed Samuel's call even though it meant the end of his time as Judge. Samuel must have been thinking, "This is what being a prophet is all about?"

That leads us to our second lesson for the morning: God sometimes calls us to deliver a message that is painful and runs counter to our own self-interest. Think about it - Samuel has a lot to be grateful for when it comes to his relationship with Eli. Not only did Eli take Samuel in when his mother couldn't take care of him, he provided for Samuel's base-level needs – shelter, food, clothing and all those necessary-for-survival

things that you and I often take for granted. Eli even provided Samuel's second tier needs too: Stability, work, family, socialization. I'd be willing to say that Eli provided Samuel's third tier needs too: a sense of family, intimacy, and a sense of connection. When I dig deep into the scriptures, I can't find *anything* that indicates Eli said or did anything "bad" to Samuel. Eli's own kids were yahoos, but Samuel served him faithfully. And yet it was Samuel who had the task of delivering the news of judgement on Eli's house. I'll tell you right now, this bothers me. But hey, it's what the lectionary gave me, right?

Have you ever been put in a situation where you had to deliver difficult news to a loved one ... news that might even endanger your relationship with that person? In Samuel's case, things worked out pretty well, mostly because Eli accepted God's judgment. Eli could have kicked Samuel out of the temple or even used his military assets against him. He could have protested or told Samuel to mind his own business and remember his place as Eli's servant. But he didn't. This doesn't happen very often. Most of the time, people go down kicking and screaming when their power is threatened or challenged. Most prophets who speak truth to power pay the price for their words and it's not until much later when people say, "Well, you know, the prophet was right about this. We should have listened!" Ask Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Ask Martin Luther King, Jr. Ask Nelson Mandela. By answering God's call, Samuel put his relationship with Eli in jeopardy.

So how do we know if we are being called to be prophetic in our ministry? How do we "test the spirits" when it comes to responding to a call to ministry? When we test the spirit to discern whether something is good, Paul says that if the result is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control," it's good. But when you have to tell someone in power, even it's an entire nation, to repent and return to God, you may not see those fruits of the spirit right away. William Willimon, a United Methodist Bishop and professor at Duke Divinity School says that entering into prophetic ministry goes beyond a personal sense of call. It also requires the affirmation of the church. You could

flip that around too. Entering into prophetic ministry goes beyond receiving the affirmation of the church, it requires a sense of call from God. In either case, you need to be listening. And listening is only part of the equation. Samuel was already listening and responding. But he was responding to Eli, or at least he thought it was Eli. Samuel was attentive to those around him and eagerly responded to what he thought was Eli's call. Had he not been listening, both he and Eli would have missed out on what God was doing.

One of the hardest things to come to terms with is that these events had to unfold in the way they did in order for God's work to be accomplished. Fortunately, Eli understood this. Eli knew it wouldn't end well for him and that his time as Judge would be over. As for Samuel, he's just getting started. Most scholars believe that Samuel was probably only 12 years old when he received his call. Now he was a prophet, and according to the last verse in our scripture lesson this morning, "As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord." As we'll see in the next couple of weeks, it's a good thing that he earned that trust because there's going to be a huge shift in the way Israel would govern itself. If you think that telling Eli that his time was coming to an end was the hardest thing Samuel ever had to do as a prophet, you're going to be blown away by what he'll have to deal with when the people start pushing back against his prophetic ministry.

Which leads me to the third lesson I want to leave you with this morning: God is calling us. And when I say "us," I mean the church. And when I say "the church," I'm not just talking about our little church here in Chico. God is calling all churches that are faithful to the gospel of Jesus to do a "new thing." When it comes to the call to prophetic ministry, sometimes God's voice can be hard to discern. Thankfully there are Elis to each of our Samuels, out there listening with us and helping us to hear. By listening for God in community, we can discern together the ways God is moving in our midst.