

Rev. Julie U. Riley

I Samuel 3:1-20

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It had been a long time since anyone spoke to a burning bush. A long time since the Red Sea had parted for God's people, or even the River Jordan, for that matter. Walls no longer tumbled at the sound of the trumpet blast as they did for Joshua nor did great armies flee from broken jars as they did for Gideon. God was quiet in the days that young Samuel played about the temple. In fact, I'd be willing to bet, based on the behavior of Eli's sons, that God was presumed to be dead, or at least absent and long forgotten.

In many ways, the time of Samuel was not so very distant from our own time. It's not always abundantly clear to us what God is saying these days, it's not as if any of us has been blinded and knocked off a horse lately. Sometimes with all the different voices clamoring for attention, it's hard to tell which one, if any, is God. It's certainly not hard to find people who act as if there is no God, unfortunately even among the temple priest.

But, as our story reminds us, the lamp of God had not gone out. God heard Hannah's desperate plea for a child and answered her prayer with the child Samuel. Hannah remembered her promise to God, and gave the child Samuel back to God, a simple, yet bold act of faithfulness. Scripture tells us that Samuel grew in both stature and favor, both with the Lord and with the people, just as we would later read about another young Jewish boy who was also at home in the temple. While God was not acting in the high drama that blockbuster movies are made of, God was still at work none-the-less in and through the lives of the faithful.

On that night in which God first spoke to Samuel, there was still no burning bush. No pillar of fire, no large stone tablets handed down from the sky; there was only a voice in the night, and Samuel, being only a young boy, did not have the wisdom or experience to recognize that it was God.

Eli, I suspect, had been asleep for a long time, not just in the literal sense, but also in the spiritual sense. Eli had long sense pulled the covers over his head, letting the darkness cover him. But that night, when he finally wiped the sleep from his eyes, he was more awake than he had been in years. As he instructed the young boy, he must have been trembling with excitement and fear. I can only imagine his overwhelming desire to linger outside the young boy's door, longing to hear God's voice, and yet dreading what God might say.

Surely Eli must have already known what God would say. Even a blind man can see the corruption and failure. Eli was supposed to be the spiritual leader of God's people, and yet even his own sons were unfaithful. Eli could see that it was time for a change, but he could not fathom what his new role would be. I suspect there have been times when most of us have felt the same way.

When Jim Fay, the founder of the Love and Logic Institute, was here last September, I had the honor of playing his chauffeur. At first, I thought he probably preferred not to "talk shop" when he was off the clock, but I soon learned that there was nothing he enjoyed more than talking about more than children. I shared with him my surprise at how quickly even very young children respond to Love and Logic. He laughed and said, "Yes, children are very pragmatic, once they discover that something won't work, they try something different. Adults are different; if they find something doesn't work, they just keep working harder at it."

In many ways, the church is no different. When we find something is not working, we have a tendency to double our efforts while we keep trying the same thing. I have been ordained now for 16 years, and for as long as I have been ordained, the “experts” in church planning have been saying that if we are going to continue to faithfully bring God’s word into the world, we are going to have to do church differently. I must admit, this was not exactly a welcome word. After devoting 4 years of my life preparing for ministry, I was afraid that all that knowledge would not be enough to prepare me for this new direction. I was afraid that all that knowledge might be extinct, or worse, that I might be extinct, that there might not be a place for me in this new and different church. One of these church planners used this analogy: for hundreds of years, the church has rolled along like a good and faithful car. We have kept the car in good conditions with fresh oil and spark plugs, and for years it has served us well. As we have driven through the years, the terrain has changed significantly, we have moved from dirt roads to gravel and from gravel to asphalt, and as the terrain has changed we have made accommodations to the car, and the car has continued to serve us well. But, as we look to the horizon, we see a dramatically different terrain. Suddenly in front of us we see not a road, but an ocean. As far as the eye can see, there is nothing but water. Now we have some decisions to be made. Do we turn back? Do we continue to try and modify this car to work on water, or do we abandon the car altogether and start building a boat?

In the Biblical story, Samuel marks the end of the period of the judges, and the beginning of a new chapter for Israel with the anointing of King Saul. It was an exciting time, and also a frightening time, particularly for Eli, what did he know about boats? And yet, I believe that it was Eli who had the most faithful response. When Samuel finally relented and told him what God had said, about the condemnation of Eli and his household, Eli simply responded, “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.” Later, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus would echo similar words, “Not my will, but thy will be done.” (Luke 22:42b)

With God’s call to Samuel, Eli’s work was done. And yet, Eli had an important role to play in the bringing in of a new age. Remember, it was Eli who first perceived God’s call to Samuel. It was Eli who instructed Samuel and prepared him to hear the word of God. Eli, like Moses, would not be permitted to cross over into the new age, but Eli still had an important role to play in God’s drama.

I suspect that as we look around God’s temple today, we will find many, like Samuel, who have labored in the temple for many years and yet have not truly known the voice of God. And, I suspect, that there are many great teachers here who may be struggling to find their role in a church that is rapidly changing. I also suspect that where you identify yourself within this story has little to do with your chronological age. It’s clear to me, however, that the church needs both the Samuels and the Elis, for they both needed one another in order to be fully faithful to God.

I think it is more than fair to say that the lamp of God has still not gone out. Those with ears to hear and eyes to see still know God to be at work in the world. And I know that we have seen many great acts of faith. Not all of those experts on church planning agree on where God will lead the church next, but they all agree that God is doing a new thing. I pray that as God speaks to us in this new day that we like Samuel, will have the courage to listen, and that we, like Eli, will have the vision to see God at work and the wisdom and courage to prepare others to hear God’s word.