

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“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.”

Today I want to spend a little time talking about the prophet Samuel.

Samuel means, “asked of God.”

If you remember the beginning of Samuel’s history,  
he was the answer to his mother Hannah’s prayers for a male child,  
a child for whom she had been praying for many years,  
and a child for whom she had endured much shame;  
a child for whom she had almost given up hope.

But at last her prayers were heard and answered.

And Hannah gave him to the church at Shiloh as soon as he was weaned  
and he grew up there under the tutelage of Eli, the Priest of Shiloh.

Now Eli had two sons of his own who were also priests at Shiloh,  
but all was not well in the house of Eli.

His sons were blaspheming against the Lord  
and Eli could do nothing to stop them.

Eli was afraid of what would happen to the church of Shiloh.

So when Samuel arrived at Shiloh,  
Eli found hope,  
if not for himself at least for the people of Shiloh.

This is where our portion of scripture takes up the tale today.

The word of the Lord was rare in those days. B  
ut not absent.

“Samuel. Samuel!”

This encounter between Samuel, Eli, and the Lord  
sends a word to us that is important for us to hear as well.

For we too live in days when the word of the Lord is rare.  
Rare, but not absent.

Notice how the word comes to Samuel,  
but Samuel does not understand at first.

It is only with the wisdom and help of Eli  
that Samuel is able to receive the whole word of God.

Why would God choose to send this message through Samuel  
and not through the wise and loyal priest Eli?

The message was for Eli after all.

Why would God risk the safe arrival of this important message to a child?  
These are definitely things to wonder about.

God is always teaching,  
so it makes me wonder what God might be wanting us to learn?  
“Samuel. Samuel.”

One way to help us wonder  
is to place ourselves inside the story  
and then wonder how that makes us feel.

When we experience this story from the inside,  
how do we see ourselves as the various players in this great drama?  
And who are the other players in relationship to us?

Who is the ancient Eli  
seeing the church around him failing in its duty  
to care for the people it should be serving?

Who are the sons of Eli  
who are using the trappings of the church to their own ends  
and blaspheming God in the process?

Who is the soon to be prophet Samuel,

receiving a hard message to share,  
and waiting in fear for the right time to share it  
in a way that it can be received?

And who are the people in the congregation of Shiloh;  
some lost to the errant path of Eli's sons,  
others losing their way and losing hope,  
and others just lost?

Cast in the light of today this story seems all too real,  
and all too dark.

“See, I am about to do something in Israel  
that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.”

What if we are to be the bearers of this message?

The Old testament,  
and truth to tell all of church history  
is a tale of a people starting off in faith  
and losing their way,  
then turning and finding it again in new ways.

It is God who remains faithful throughout.

As Paul says, The gift of our faith we carry in clay jars...  
jars that far too often break.

And so we must learn to take care.

And, take a friend.

That is, I believe, one of the big reasons  
why the message for Eli came through Samuel.

There are other reason I am sure  
but today I would like to focus on just this one.

How do we hear God... and know that it is God?

Hearing God takes discernment  
and discernment is a word that the church kicks around a lot

without, if you will pardon the obvious pun,  
nearly enough discernment.

So today, in our remaining time, a quick and dirty course on discernment.

How do we discern?

There are three main steps.

Peace, Invitation, and Listening.

All of them are simple to say and difficult to do.

Peace is probably the hardest of all,

since we live in a such noisy and selfish world.

I find that when I desire discernment in a situation,

the easiest way to begin is to name to myself,

out loud,

what my best outcome would be if it were all about me.

How would *I* answer this conundrum?

Maybe I write it down so I can see it and remember it.

Then I take a breath

and name my worst outcome in the situation.

The thing I am most afraid of.

I write it down as well.

Maybe I even take some time to doodle around these extremes

and turn them into art.

In this way these extremes can be offered up to God in prayer

and gotten out of your head.

Let God hold them while you wait in peace.

Silence is such a rare commodity in the world

that many voices will rise when given the time and space.

Not all of them are God.

God's voice will be neither the first nor the loudest.

Often, God's voice can come padded or wrapped in other voices.

Wisdom tells us

that while other voices are impatient and loud,

God's is not.

God is patient.

Peace will take time,

like a bonfire that needs to settle to the embers.

Take the time.

It will be time well spent.

Then, when you are ready,

settled into that place of peace,

invite God to speak.

“Speak for your servant is listening.”

And then wait again.

And listen.

And now we return to the other question that started this reflection on discernment.

Why did God pull Samuel into the midst of his message to Eli.

Listening, you see, is much more than just hearing.

Any time we have the chutzpah

to presume that we are hearing the word of God

we would do well to test that message

with a great deal of humility.

A. Great. Deal.

I believe that is a big part

of why God includes Samuel in the conversation.

In Samuel and Eli's simple circle of trust

the message that Samuel heard is tested and tried.

Eli commands Samuel to leave nothing out of what he has heard.

Once they have sifted through the words that Samuel had heard

and tested them for the truth, Eli is sure that they have really listened.

And he responds to Samuel, “It *is* the Lord.”

In this interaction Samuel learns a vital lesson,

and Eli learns that all is not as dark as it seems.

I love the way the author ties up this encounter.

“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.”

In the times ahead I fear that we will need many trustworthy prophets,

so listen with the ears of Samuel,

and the wisdom of Eli.

Amen.