

## 1 Samuel 3:1-21

To us, Hannah's promise to God to dedicate her son to God may appear rash. But, the dedication of her son is akin to the sacrament of baptism or the dedication of an infant. In this sacrament, we confirm God's blessing and God's call upon the life of a child. We affirm, just as Hannah, who had been barren for many years, did, that our children do not belong to us, but are given to us by God.

Samuel lives in a precarious time, when "messages from the Lord" were very rare. This is a continuation of the problem at the end of the book of Judges where "all the people did what was right in their own eyes." In the preceding chapter, we learn how Eli's own sons did what was right in **their** own eyes, rather than God's eyes, in their work as priests. The times are as dark as the night that falls at the beginning of the story.

The boy, Samuel, is bedded down in the temple with the Ark of the Covenant while Eli slept in another room. The boy hears a voice calling and runs to Eli to ask what he wants. Poor young Samuel is really confused when he hears the voice calling him. Three times, Samuel responds to a calling. Among those three times, Samuel responds, "Here I am" four times, once to God and three times to Eli. Although Samuel's obedience and spirit are admirable, he mistook



an ailing Eli for God's actual voice.

The narrator adds a brief description of the state of Eli, noting that his "eyesight had begun to grow dim, so that he could not see," but Eli sees through all of the confusion of that night clearly. He finally realizes that it is God calling Samuel and instructs the boy in the proper response to a divine word.

He anticipates the content of the message urging Samuel not to withhold any part of it from him, accepting the hard word against his family with: "It is the Lord's will. Let him do what he thinks best." Eli's eyesight may be failing, but his insight is sharp. He responds to the oracle of judgment with dignity and humility.

Theologian and author Barbara Brown Taylor, describes what the boy prophet's life in the temple might have looked like:

*"We can only guess what it was like for Samuel, as the faithful brought their burnt-offerings, their sin-offerings, and their guilt-offerings to the temple. They were burdened, ashen-faced people, most of them hauling their stubborn animals up to the altar to be killed. There was a great deal of blood, blood splashed on the altar and blood sprinkled on the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the sanctuary.*



*The burning incense did battle with the smell but could not beat it; the place stank, no getting around it. Maybe Samuel tended the cauldron where the sacrificial meat was boiled, or helped Eli locate the portion he was allowed to eat as the temple priest. Maybe Samuel was allowed to feed on some of the scraps himself; there was little else for a growing boy to eat."*

*"At night he lay down by the ark of God, the legendary throne of the invisible king Yahweh that Israel carried into battle at the head of her armies. It was reputed to contain all the sacred relics of the nation's past: a container of manna, Aaron's budded rod, the tablets of the covenant. Sleeping next to it had to be like sleeping in a graveyard, or under a volcano."*

Not a day or a boyhood spent in the park, but a boyhood spent in close proximity to all that was considered sacred in his day, a boyhood spent in the very household of God. Over the years of his apprenticeship, he would have enjoyed an insider's view of religious life. The language of faith would have been his first language — the language he spoke most fluently. He would have handled holy objects, listened to whispered prayers. He would have seen the contradictions, the intrigues, the scandals. Yet, he would have been primed to know God early and well.



There's a big difference between knowing about God, and knowing God. The writer of 1st Samuel may have also been saying something bolder: something about the spiritual risk involved in becoming too insular; too "churchy;" something about the shadow side of human institutions – even the most well-meaning and well-run religious ones; something about the necessary role of the outsider-as-prophet. Is it possible that our churchiness dulls our ears to God's call?

If so, we can take comfort in the fact that God didn't give up on Samuel. He called, called, and called again. He called until Samuel learned how to listen. According to the religious hierarchies of the day, the people who should have heard God's voice in this story were Eli and his sons. They were the authorities, the ultimate insiders by birth and by vocation. But they were not the ones God chose.

Instead, God chose Samuel, a child, a boy on the periphery, a child who wasn't bound by the political interests of his elders, a child who could tolerate an unfamiliar voice and an uncomfortable message that would upend the very institution he knew best.

God's word to Samuel reveals the next phase of God's activity and establishes Samuel's prophetic credibility. But within this familiar



story, we can sometimes miss significant details as the Bible tends to be very brief. In light of the very positive relationship that Samuel and Eli share,

it is interesting that the reason for the judgment of Eli's house is the relationship between Eli and his own sons. Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli, are blaspheming by eating the choicest parts of the sacrificial animals, the parts that are to be given to God, and Eli has failed to restrain them. Even when confronted by those who are offering the sacrifice, the sons of Eli refuse to give the fatty parts of the animal to YHWH. Their appetites lead them to abuse their power, insult YHWH, and put their own desires above the needs of the people they serve.

*"Messages from the Lord were very rare, visions were quite uncommon."* Many places in the Bible describe God as forgetful, ignorant, remote, deaf, and even asleep. In today's reading, God is portrayed as speechless. It's as if God is unable or unwilling to talk. We generally don't interpret these descriptions of God in a literal way. We explain these unflattering depictions of God as "anthropomorphisms," or as paltry human attempts to describe God who is ultimately beyond description, and to articulate the experience of many people today as the loneliness of abandonment in a silent world.



After the Asian tsunami that killed 225,000 people in 11 countries (December 26, 2004), a little Indonesian boy remarked on television, *"We have left our traditional ways, and so God was angry with us. He abandoned us. I think I am alive today to tell our people this."* Indonesia is no more wicked or deserving of divine punishment than any other country, and in the Gospel of John, Jesus discouraged linking human misfortune with divine punishment. But that little boy was on to something, He was right to describe divine activity as mysteriously intertwined with human choices, to picture human history as a dynamic synergism between God's speech and humanity's response. History is not mechanistic; it consists of the interplay between the free decisions of people and the sovereign love of God.

The silence of God and the absence of visions were not just a subjective feeling, a poetic anthropomorphism, or a human projection onto their image of God. Rather, Samuel accurately described an objective state of affairs. His day was a period of political anarchy in Israel's history when *"every person did what was right in his own eyes,"* when the two sons of the priest Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were *"wicked men; they had no regard for the Lord."* People were not listening. God was not speaking. God was silent. Visions were rare. Having left their traditional ways, as the Indonesian boy put it, God was angry with Israel. Maybe God was



even sulking.

It's a chilling thought to imagine that God might grant humanity's request for autonomy, that God could honour our insistence that He leave us alone, or that He would stop speaking as a consequence of our not listening. Perhaps God's last, terrifying word to us might be, "I have answered your prayers and now grant you the horrible freedom you have craved. Since you are so disinterested as not to listen, I will no longer speak. From now on, the only voices you will hear will be your own."

But one single person can make a difference. Samuel proved to be the exception in this story. Dedicated to Yahweh by his mother Hannah at an early age, he "continued to grow in stature and in favour with the Lord and with men." In contrast to the silence that had fallen upon the land, God spoke to him three times as a little boy, and he responded with his famous words, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." In contrast to the priest Eli and his two degenerate sons who flaunted their sexploitations in the place of worship, *"the Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and He let none of his words fall to the ground."*

The nation recognized him as a prophet who heard from and spoke for Yahweh. Samuel eventually crowned Israel's first king, Saul, but



not before warning the nation about the oppression inherent in political power. By himself, Samuel ended the drought of divine silence in Israel, for "Samuel's words came to all Israel".

Perhaps the Indonesian boy was right. If there are "no more words nowadays" from God, if God has "withdrawn the grace of His word," that might have more to do with our human refusal to listen than with any divine reluctance to speak.

The story of the calling of Samuel is replete with irony and foreshadowing. The irony is bitter: Samuel thinks the voice calling him in the night belongs to Eli, but the voice belongs to YHWH, and the message is against Eli and his house. The oracle of doom for the house of Eli foreshadows the oracles Samuel delivers over the course of his life.

As the first prophet of ancient Israel in the period of the monarchy, Samuel exposes the threat of monarchs who are concerned with their own security and wealth rather than the well-being of their people. He calls out against ruling families, foretelling not only the end of the leadership of Eli and his sons but also the end of Saul's kingship.

The tendency of the powerful to take advantage of the vulnerable is



a chief concern of Samuel. When the people cry out for a king later in this book, Samuel warns them against kings, who seek after their own good more than the collective good of their people. A king "will take the best" from his people and use it for his own betterment. The ideal ruler of the people seeks only the good of the people, and reflects the concern of YHWH for the poor and powerless.

1 Samuel depicts the origins of the monarchy in ancient Israel and begins with the song of Hannah. Hannah sings of the character of YHWH, a god who breaks "the bows of the mighty" and yet girds "the feeble" with strength. This same God fills up the hungry and "raises up the poor from the dust." Just as the call of Samuel sets the tone for his prophetic career and foreshadows the oracles he will deliver against the human leaders of the people, the song of Hannah represents the central focus of YHWH's leadership of the people: concern for the poor and powerless, and judgment of those who prey on the vulnerable and abuse their power, just as Mary's Magnificat did in Luke's Gospel.

Even though our form of government is different, Samuel's message and the message of his mother, are still, sadly, pertinent. The poor and powerless are still at the mercy of the strong. Human appetite still destroys lives and livelihood. The task of the church is twofold: (1) to cry out against injustice and the abuse of power in the world,



and (2) to hear and respond with humility to the message of judgment that challenges our own practices.

There are several lessons in this story. The first is the ease with which we may miss God's call or attribute it to someone else. Most people who speak of their call do not describe a major disruption in their lives. There are few Damascus Road experiences. Instead, they speak of a quiet, slow awakening to something: be that a life of a particular office in the church; an injustice that needs to be addressed; or a task that needs attention. Like Samuel, they often tell of a period of uncertainty about exactly what and why God is calling them. In addition, Samuel needed Eli to help him understand his call. It often takes others in our lives to aid us in understanding the call that God places before us. Part of our community of faith is to aid each other to see and live out our individual callings from God.

A second lesson concerns Samuel as the outsider. Eli's sons are from the priestly line, and it is their birthright to serve in the Temple. Yet, they have not acted justly and have used their position for gain instead of service to God. Throughout the Bible, God does not always choose the expected ones. Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David were all unlikely choices. Jesus calls fishermen and laborers to serve as disciples instead of the priests and prophets of



Jerusalem. Position in the church or community is not a guarantee in God's world. All, even outsiders, can and are given tasks in God's kingdom.

God has no interest in the ways we humans order the world. The prophet Joel notes, *"I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters will prophesy; your old men shall dream dreams; and your young men shall see visions; even on your male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit."* God calls all, even the unexpected.

The third point continues one of the themes from the wilderness. Just as moving into the promised land did not guarantee a perfect life, neither does God's call to serve. God's words to Samuel were hard to hear and even harder to tell to his mentor. Samuel's first act of his call is to tell God's word to Eli and that word involved judgment against Eli's own children. Like Samuel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, God's call often involves working to change human systems that are broken, and this can lead down difficult paths.

God's call comes when we least expect it and often to those we least expect. God is always the God of surprises. We as the church need to be like Eli, encouraging all to hear the voice that calls them to be all that they were created to be. At the same time, we help



each other to tell the truth even when the truth is hard to hear. We need to remember we follow one who is always turning our human systems upside down!

There are many voices competing for our attention. How many of us can say that we really know God well enough to recognize a word as being from God or someone else? Whose voice do we listen to?

Dan Rather once asked Mother Teresa what she said to God when she prayed. She answered, "I don't say anything. I listen!" So Dan Rather turned the question around and asked, "Well then, what does God say to you?" Mother Teresa replied, "He doesn't say anything. He listens." After a long pause she added, "And if you don't understand that, I can't explain it to you."

While Samuel's call came ages ago, the truth is that God still calls. God equips all of us with gifts and graces, interests and talents to be used to bless one another. Whether in ministry or other vocations, whether in the household, in the community, in the workplace, or in the church, everyone has a job to do. Paul says: "It is God who produces in you the desires and actions that please him" No matter what desires, dreams, and visions we have, they all come from God. What will we do with those desires, those dreams, those visions? Will we use what God has given us to bless others and ourselves?



Answering God's call leads to living one's best life, to a life that fulfills Jesus' summary of the great commandments to love God, others, and oneself. The question is: "What will you do, what will I do, what will we do, individually and collectively, to answer God's call in our lives?"

**Amen.**



## **PRAYERS FOR OCTOBER 12, 2025**

### **THANKSGIVING SUNDAY**

We give thanks that our heavenly Father cares for us and knows our every need. Trusting in God's provision, goodness and bountiful mercy, we bring our prayers and praise, confident that God hears and responds according to God's eternal purposes.

We give you thanks, gracious God, for all the good things you have blessed us with in our lives: For the gift of life, for each new day; for each breath, for each heartbeat; we appreciate having bodies that serve us day in and day out with the ability to carry out our daily activities; we celebrate the energy and vitality of youth and those who enjoy good physical health; We give thanks for the use of our senses, and for our intellect and emotions. Make us good stewards of our bodies caring for them as the temple you have created, along with the particular God-given abilities, temperament and skills we uniquely embody. May we use them for your purposes to bring glory to your name through our words and actions every day.

Heavenly Father-Mothering God, we give you thanks for works of beauty of every kind. In their creation and in our appreciation of them you have enriched and added immense joy to our lives. Bless and encourage all that is good, inspiring and uplifting in our arts, music and culture. For in these we catch a glimmer of your majestic presence and experience a sense of awe and wonder in the mystery that is beyond our understanding.

Merciful God we give thanks for this season of harvesting of all that the earth produces. By your provision many, including ourselves, are clothed and fed and lack no necessities. Yet we also remember this Thanksgiving those who live in poverty, in want, who struggle daily to survive, and do not have the privilege of thriving and flourishing. Teach us to be generous with the gifts and blessings you have first given us.

We give you thanks Almighty God for supplying us with fresh water, and the vast ocean waters that support marine life Help us to care for and manage our water resources wisely. Have mercy on those who are suffering drought, those who are recovering from flooding, those whose water sources are contaminated and unfit for human consumption. Supply clean water to all who need it.

We give you thanks, for the opportunity to work, to find meaning and purpose in our daily lives; to grow and learn and to rest and play. Help us to serve you and others faithfully in our vocation, and through our volunteer activities. Provide



work for the those seeking employment, those who are unemployed or are in gig, seasonal or other unsecure working situations. Bless all places of learning, the students, teachers, and support staff. Help them to learn what is good, true and beautiful, to distinguish between right and wrong, and to contribute to the needs of our society. Help them grow in strength and wisdom for the challenges ahead. We pray that the teachers' strike in Alberta would end soon. We pray for all international students.

Almighty God, we thank you for the financial resources you have blessed us with. Help us to discern how to use these gifts in ways that are pleasing to you and support your mission in this world. Warn and correct us when we falsely put our hope in the pursuit of worldly possessions or wealth. Grant our church the necessary financial resources to carry out its work in ministry and mission.

We thank you for the gift of family, parents and children, relatives, friends, acquaintances and neighbours. Let the light of your love shine in our homes. Help us to overcome any strife and conflict with your love, patience and forgiveness. Help parents and grandparents in the task of raising children. Comfort the lonely and the homebound, and provide them with caring support and good company found in community.

We thank you Loving God for the blessings of living in a democratic and relatively peaceful society in Canada. In gratitude we give thanks for the ongoing stewardship of lands and waters cared for by our Indigenous neighbours for countless generations before we arrived to inhabit their lands. We give thanks for the diversity of immigrants and refugees that are establishing new lives in our communities. Help those in all levels of government and in positions of responsibility to uphold and maintain honesty and truth, justice and peace. Encourage all our citizens to contribute and strive for the common good of all.

We pray with lungs that barely dare to breathe with hope for a lasting success of the fragile peace process underway between Israel and Palestine. We pray for filled bellies and safety; for the rebuilding of communities, including homes, hospitals, schools and all essential infrastructures. We pray that hostages be returned and lives be restored. We pray for the healing of the distrust borne out of all the times over these centuries when promises of peace have been broken by one side or the other. Even if there are leaders or individuals or groups that still spit hate as the peace process progresses, may we breathe life into the underlying common humanity that binds all together.



We call upon the nations of the world to hear the cry of those who have suffered loss of homes, lives and hope because of climate change. We pray for the people of the Philippines who have experienced a second earthquake in as many weeks. We pray for areas where climate change has led to drought and conflict over water and resources. May we respond to the cry of the Earth and those living in poverty, for peacemakers who challenge and resist the conflict and violence that threatens so many: We ask that they may teach us and show us the way.

We pray for those who mourn; ease the suffering of all who are lonely, recovering from addictions, suffering from mental illness, or live in pain, for those who need healing. Give them strength to overcome setbacks and heal and surround them with your love and compassion.

We pray for ourselves., Unsettle us and arouse within us a passion for justice. Inspire us to see a vision of the world you are bringing about where wellness, wholeness, restoration and flourishing of all is experienced. Motivate and equip us to partner with you in helping to bring this new reality into being. Enable us to share the gift of hope, so that others are strengthened and equipped to continue in their lifelong journey of faith.

We hold in our prayers; First Lutheran in Vancouver - interim Pastor David Lefsrud; Lutheran Campus Ministries and Campus Chaplains. We pray for Pope Leo XIV; ELCIC Bishop Larry Kochendorfer, ELCA Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry, Bishop Kathy, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Shane Parker, Bishops and congregations of the Moravian Worldwide church, Bishop Imad Hadda and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, our sister congregation San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, and Holy Trinity Lutheran in Port Angeles. We pray that you bless the ministries of all deacons, pastors, lay leaders, musicians and volunteers.

Loving God, daily we depend on you to care for us and to give us what we need. Keep our hearts and minds set firmly on You and your lifegiving Word, so that we may always trust in you, and in turn be generous with the gifts you have given us to share with others. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray:

**Our Father .....**