



"God Still Speaks"
1 Samuel 3:1-21

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The story of young Samuel, who grew up to be a famous prophet in ancient Israel, contains all the elements of an arresting soap opera and seems far removed from us, and yet it contains something of the Gospel truth for you and me today.

The story begins with a man who had two wives. One of them had given birth to several children, but the other wife had yet to conceive. In the custom of the day, the husband would give portions of his sacrificial temple gifts to his family members in celebration and thanksgiving. The children always received plenty, along with their mother. And as for the barren wife, well, she received a double portion because her husband loved her very much. But you know how human nature can be. Even in the desire to express his love, her lack of children came to the fore. He said he loved her. He said it every year as he gave out his gifts, but with the other wife, with babes in her arms, rubbing it in behind his back.

The barren wife, whose name was Hannah, stopped eating and fed herself only with tears as her husband tried to explain that his love should be enough, that his love should be worth that of ten children, and that she should come to some sense of peace about her own childless condition.

But Hannah experienced no such peace. In the depth of her distress and lonely pain, Hannah arose one day and presented herself to the Lord. To call what she said a prayer to God makes it sound a bit too pious, for she expressed herself weeping bitterly. The struggle and suffering she knew was all over her as she "had it out" with the God of Abraham and Sarah. In her crying out to the Lord, her petition was a simple one: ***"Look here. Remember me. Give me a child, and I will dedicate that child to you forever. My child will serve you all the days of life. Look here! Remember me with a child!"***

Some conversations with God are timeless. Some prayers must echo forever in those chambers of the human heart. The prayer of a childless woman doesn't just stick there to the pages of scripture, for it veritably leaps off the page and seasons the human history to follow ... that prayer of a broken-hearted soul: ***"Remember me! Do not forsake your servant!"***

Hannah's tears did not go unnoticed. The temple priest there by the front door couldn't really miss all her carrying on. In fact, when the crying kept up and

the woman seemed to be moving her lips but wasn't saying anything out loud, the priest accused her of being drunk. Maybe she didn't find the proper place, the assigned seating there in the temple; or maybe she didn't assume the proper position or have the proper dress; or maybe the priest wasn't used to seeing someone lash out at God in prayer with such desperation, such anger. Whatever reason, this priest named Eli accused her of having too much to drink.

As if Eli had any room to talk! For this priest had enough family problems of his own. The pages of Scripture say that his own boys, known forever as the *"sons of Eli,"* were scoundrels and had no regard for the Lord. For far too many years behind the scenes at the temple, they were busy desecrating everything their father was supposed to stand for. They messed with the preparations for sacrifice and got into the food used for special celebrations. They were feasting on the fattest of those portions that were intended for God. They treated anything holy with a contempt that went far beyond *"boys being boys."*

In his old age, Eli tried to get those sons of his to clean up their act, tired of hearing about it all everywhere from everybody. But they would not listen. In fact, those two sons were so bad that in the storied pages of the tradition, it even says that *"it was the will of the Lord to kill them."* And Eli was worried about Hannah's being drunk?

"In due time," the story goes on, the Lord remembered Hannah, and she conceived and had a baby boy whom she named Samuel. After the child had been weaned, Hannah took him to the house of the Lord and offered him back to God, this time with another prayer and with a rather unbelievable act of faith.

Samuel must have become something of the devout son that Eli never had, serving Eli and serving around the temple and serving God every day. The child lived there in the temple with Eli, a "biblical boarding school" of sorts. Every year, his mother came to visit; and instead of cookies and dorm room stuff, Hannah made Samuel a new robe to wear for his life's work there before the Lord. While Samuel went about the Lord's work, Hannah's family went about their routines, and Hannah actually had three more sons and two daughters. So much for Hannah's condition and Samuel's being an only child!

Young Samuel was the product of a complicated mix in that nature/nurture debate. His father lived and practiced the faith. His mother had struggled with real problems of life and the perceived death of not being able to give birth. Hannah had exhibited an honest faith in God that included more than a little anger and some ultimatums, with all the vibes of having a thick skinned, hard-nosed prayer life. Young Samuel found himself working for an aging priest whose promiscuous sons were on the fast track to encountering the wrath of God. Eli himself was growing too old to get things done, having lost a step or two as a mentor, and his eyes had long since gone dim. It's here in this soap-opera narrative that we pick up

the story in our text this morning.

There couldn't have been much passion involved in the daily temple life that surrounded young Samuel. The atmosphere was far from one religious high to another. It was hardly the type of environment where miracles were too numerous to count. In fact, by all reports, the reality was that experiences of the Lord were hard to find. It wasn't a particularly holy time. ***"The word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread."*** Polls would have shown religious life to be flowing like an ebb tide. And in the midst of it all, Samuel was struggling in his daily drudgeries to live, to work, and to grow.

Then came that call, that unexpected voice. Early one morning, still before dawn, when the lamp of God had not yet gone out, the young boy heard that voice calling his name, ***"Samuel! Samuel!"*** Not once, or twice, not even the theologically crisp and Trinitarian-like three times, but four times he heard the voice. It was on that fourth time that ***"the Lord came and stood there, calling as before."*** The boy responded, ***"Speak, for your servant is listening."*** And what the Lord proceeded to tell Samuel about the sons of Eli and the wrath of God was enough to make anyone's ears tingle.

When morning came and the doors of the house of the Lord were opened to the light of another day, opened once again to the light of God's faithfulness and promise, Samuel told Eli all that he now knew. And so this revered church school scene, this call of young Samuel, this tale of the prophet's words, ***"Here am I!"*** ... this scene comes to a close, but the old story goes on.

For as the writer of 1 Samuel concludes, ***"As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground."***

I know of another time and another place where visions are rare, a time when religious experience trickles along as something less than a flowing river. A time and place where miracles seldom seem to happen, a time when conversations about God in the public square are dominated by those on the extreme who talk the loudest, those who define faith by issues, those who understand religious experience in one way ... one way that happens, of course, to be their way. A place that can be described in many different ways, but saying it is overflowing with holiness doesn't quite fit.

The sons and daughters of Eli have their moments to shine in this time and place with no shortage of the desecration of what was once thought to be holy, with greed and selfishness and power taken to the nth degree, with such scorn and contempt concerning the things that ought to be respected and valued, and with the label ***"scoundrel"*** perhaps being taken to new heights. Another time and another place where the word of the Lord is rare and visions are not widespread. And I suspect that you know of this other time and place very well, too.

This time and this place beg for a prophet's daughter, a prophet's son. Creation itself must be moaning and a desperate plea can be heard, a lament for someone to dream again and to lead and to preach about freedom, and justice, and nonviolence, and peace. There is this longing to hear and see that vision articulated by Martin Luther King more than 45 years ago in the sultry heat of a summer's day in our nation's Capitol, a vision that pictured ...

“the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners sitting down together at the table of brotherhood ... of the heat of injustice and the heat of oppression being transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice ... of little black boys and black girls joining hands with little white boys and girls as sisters and brothers ... of a nation where our children will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

So many years after he spoke those words, Dr. King's vision still brings chills and tears to many of us, because in this time and place, amidst our economic recessionary fears and political uncertainties and a world seemingly always at war, the word of the Lord is apparently rarely spoken or heard ... and visions are not widespread nor are they attended to even when they appear.

But in this time and place I also know people who struggle to live, work, and grow ... like young Samuel. I think of people who have had their fair share of arguments with God, those who perhaps push the boundaries of what we call prayer. You know about those experiences in the family, those attempts at understanding the apparent randomness of when life's deck is dealt, those personal battles “being fought within” just to ask why or how. We all know people who have cried out to the Lord, and who have wept bitterly like Hannah.

The story goes on ... this drama of God and God's people. You and I may be living in a time and place where visions are rare, and yet we find ourselves surrounded by faithful people like Hannah and Samuel here in this time and place:

- * faithful souls who sing and teach here every week to share the story of God's life-giving love and ever-present nearness in Jesus our Lord;
- * dear people who cook for men and women who are hungry, who visit individuals who are lonely, who serve as advocates for those people who are powerless and ignored within systemic injustices too numerous to count;
- * those modern prophets who do the right thing no matter the personal cost, who dare to dream dreams and share visions of a new day, who meet all the darkness the world can muster with the light of Christ's love, writing to those in seats of government and power on behalf of this cause or that, or daring to protest the lack of healthcare for those who are vulnerable, or giving unselfishly of time/talent/treasure in the face

of the challenges of these uncertain days.

But even more than that, we believe ourselves to be surrounded by the very presence of God, who still speaks ... who still calls ... who still comes to us in even the darkest of nights. For while we live and move and have our being still on the dark side of the coming dawn of God's new creation, the lamp of God has not yet gone out. Indeed, that light will shine forever in the darkness, and the darkness shall never overcome it ... not even here and now in this, the "*other time and place*" we know so well.

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