

YOUR SERVANT IS LISTENING

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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John 1:43–51

1 Samuel 3:1-20

We call ourselves Christians. And as a Christian, I, for one, was disturbed to read in the *New York Times* this week about how the so-called Proud Boys, just before marching on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, stopped to kneel in the street and pray in the name of Jesus. They prayed, the Times reported, for God to bring “reformation and revival.” They gave thanks for “the wonderful nation we’ve all been blessed to be in.” They asked God for the restoration of their “value systems,” and for the “courage and strength to both represent [God] and represent our culture well.” And they invoked the divine protection for what was to come. We have all seen how that march turned out.¹

What are we to make of the fact that many members of that violent, angry mob embodying hate and evil apparently believed that they were following Jesus up the hill? Do these people speak for God? Or for us?

Ours is not the first generation to wrestle with such questions. Israel at the time of this morning’s lesson was plagued by evil and sordidness. These were the years, some generations after Moses and Joshua had led the Israelites into the Promised Land. It was a period of perpetual conflict and violence, the Bible tells us, during which political leadership was at best sporadic and “everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” Not only was “the word of the Lord...rare in those days,” but the religious leadership over Israel—the people who claimed to speak for God—was corrupt. The chief priest Eli was an old man by this time, whose eyesight was so dim he could no longer see. His sons had done evil in the sight of the Lord, evil which Eli was either unwilling or unable to stop. There was no one to check this ongoing abuse of power by the young priests, and so it continued.

The Israelites began to clamor that they wanted a king, like the nations round about them. But could a king be trusted? Who would speak the truth to power? Would a fallible human ruler stay attuned to the voice of God once he was seated on the throne? Particularly when the voice of God was apparently so rarely heard. Who would dare to stand and, by giving voice to the Lord’s proclamation, unleash God’s power into the affairs of rulers and nations?

It turns out that this is a turning point for Israel. Our text this morning marks the beginning of a new thing that God does: commissioning a new role in the nation of Israel, the office of “trustworthy prophet of the Lord” (v. 20). And this prophet will ultimately inaugurate the kingship that Israel has begun to long for.

¹ Elizabeth Dias and Ruth Graham, “How White Evangelical Christians Fused With Trump Extremism,” *New York Times*, January 11, 2021.

And so we meet Samuel. He is a boy not quite on the cusp of manhood—12 years old the Jewish tradition says. He has served at the temple as a Nazarite—someone consecrated to God—since he was just a toddler, yet he does not yet “know the Lord.” The narrator tells us that the event about to unfold takes place before dawn. In other words, it is nighttime, devoid of vision. The two characters in the story are lying down: old Eli in the vestibule of the temple and young Samuel in the nave, near the ark of God. Then it happens. Without explanation or preparation, the voice of the Lord enters the night to break the silence. The divine voice calls to Samuel. The call is direct and two-fold: “Samuel, Samuel.” Only Samuel hears it. Eli does not.

Calls from God can be like that: so personal, so private, so intimate. There are no witnesses, not even our closest companion. Furthermore, we may not recognize these calls when they come. How could the boy ever imagine that it was God’s voice calling to him in his sleep? Upon hearing his name called, Samuel misidentifies the caller. “Behold, here am I,” the boy replies to Eli, only to be told, “I did not call you; go back to bed.” In characteristic style, the call comes three times. God persists. Three times Samuel goes to Eli who at last realizes what is happening and instructs Samuel in the proper reply. It is the aged man of dim eyesight who alone is there to speak the word of the Lord, to tell young Samuel that there is such a thing as the “Word of the Lord.” It is Eli, the melancholy priest whose life seems over, who alone is the link between the ancient stories and the squint-eyed, sleepy boy standing beside his bed. “It is the Lord,” says Eli, go, lie down.” So the fourth time the call comes, Samuel knows what to say, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

The terrible words of God that follow, announcing unending punishment upon the house of Eli, are not for us to grapple with today. Suffice it to say that Samuel lies down until morning when, says the narrator, he is “afraid to tell the vision to Eli.” No longer is Samuel an innocent child; instead, he bears a terrible message that he is afraid to tell, though he knows he must. A call can mature a person fast, inducing fear even as it impels one to speak. The narrator puts it this way, “Samuel grew and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.” The news is not good for Eli, whose sons have disgraced the priestly line and illustrated the need for kings. Because the priests cannot be trusted to rule, God must anoint a conventional king; and Samuel is to be the kingmaker.

Now, notice the ironies here. At this point in his young life, Samuel is a frankly bewildered boy with questions rather than answers. He needs Eli to help him make sense of this voice calling in the night. Eli—the blind man, the disgraced priest who has failed to discipline his own sons—is the man who introduces Samuel to God. While Eli has failed to pass on faithfulness to his own flesh and blood, he now serves as spiritual parent for his young charge, Samuel. Though Eli’s eyes may be failing him, his knowledge of the Lord, and his experience of the revelation of God’s word, are not. It takes both the attentiveness of the young Samuel’s ears and the wisdom of the old priest’s heart and mind to birth this new office in the service of the Lord. Likewise, it takes both the authority of this failing priest and the obedience of this youthful protégé to bring the Lord’s judgment to fruition. Even though this prophesy will bring about the destruction of Eli and his two sons, this elderly priest receives Samuel’s words as the trustworthy words of a prophet: “It is the Lord,” Eli says; “let him do what seems good to him.”

This season of Epiphany in which we now worship celebrates the revelation of God, particularly in the coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Today's lesson makes the crucial point that speaking and listening in human community—as in the communication of Eli and Samuel—have become one of the main means by which the light of God's revelation breaks into the affairs of this world. Earlier in the biblical story, God has spoken directly and through dreams and through angels and through Moses. And sometimes God's creatures have listened and other times not. But here, at this point in the story, when words from the Lord are rare, this speaking and listening becomes a communal affair, dependent on both the actions of both Eli and Samuel. As the stories of Saul and David and their successor kings spin on from this point, there will be times when the Lord seems absent from the scene. All we will hear are words of human beings, on the one hand, counterpoised with actions of human beings, on the other. And yet even here we will learn that the Lord is at work. Indeed, the Lord has drawn as near as the words and actions of our fellow human beings, attuned or not attuned to the voice of their God.

Some three millennia after the call of Samuel, we Christians affirm that Jesus Christ is the Word—with a capital “W”—of God, God's perfect revelation. And although the historical Jesus is no longer with us, the resurrected Christ remains among us in the power of his Holy Spirit. Through him, God's will for us is known: it is to rescue us from ourselves and from evil in all its forms—individual, social and cosmic. It is to love us into loving ourselves and God and neighbor with a boundless love that knows no end, and from which nothing in heaven or on earth can separate us. It is to commission us to be his agents of that love in ministering to a hurting and anxious world, working with others for justice, freedom and peace.

There will be those who do not listen, who make God into their own image. The marauding so-called Christians in Washington are surely not hearing the Word of the Lord revealed in Jesus Christ. Sadly, this is not something new in America. This hate and fear are part of our nation's history, and they've been here for generations. And they have also been present in the church. They have been grown and cultivated and supported by toxic theologies taught in some seminaries and then preached in pulpits throughout this country for generations. Theology matters. How we approach the Bible matters. How we listen for God's word matters.

When the Spirit gathers us into the church, she also abides with us, teaching us Christ's will by illuminating the Scripture that is read and proclaimed and by guiding our collective discernment. As the Presbyterian Book of Order puts it, “In the worship and service of God and the government of the church, matters are to be ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” This is a task for the community. Heaven knows, we will not always get it right. Church councils are fallible and history—both ancient and very recent—is replete with examples of human passions mistaken for divine instruction: crusades, religious wars, burnings at the stake, slavery justified, discrimination against women and minorities and LGBTQ folk, to name but a few. It is for this reason that Reformed Christians affirm that, “The church reformed, [is] always to be reformed according to the Word of God” in the power of the Spirit.

In the days and weeks ahead, which may well be filled with angry voices claiming the sanction of God, churches like Union Church need to really be the church, a community clear about its commitment to Christ, fully immersed in his love and grace and compassion and justice. It's a time to remember who we are and whose we. It's time to renounce evil and its power. This is a *kairos* moment for the church, that is, a time of decision. Our call is to keep at it—seeking collectively to discern God's will for our time and place, and to live according to that Word. This is our common task: to speak and listen to one another, with prayer and humility, but also with confidence that God will be with us as Christ has promised, speaking to us from the silence when we gather in his name. The promise of Epiphany is that God's Word will go forth in power, in our day and in all the days to come, even to the end of the age.

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us, and blesses us with peace, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.