

Who is Calling You?

In today's reading we hear from Samuel and Eli. Samuel is just a boy and Eli is nearly blind.

Samuel's mother Hannah came to the temple every day to pray for a baby, yet was unable to conceive. One day Eli heard her and thought she was intoxicated. She was in a trance-like state, moving her lips, but not speaking audibly. Eli chided her, thinking her to be intoxicated. She explained her dilemma, and Eli immediately softened. He told her that God would grant her request. Then he prayed on Hannah's behalf, and Samuel was the result.

When Hannah was praying, she promised God that if she was given a son, she would dedicate him to the Church. She was able to conceive by her husband Elkanah, and when Samuel was weaned, approximately age three, she dedicated him to the Church and in service to God.

Samuel is a male given name and a surname of Hebrew origin meaning either "name of God" or "God heard" (שם האלוהים Shem HaElohim) (שמע אלוהים Sh'ma Elohim).

In today's reading, Samuel is sleeping in the temple, near the ark of the covenant, while Eli is sleeping in his room. The voice of God calls out "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, 'Here I am!' and ran to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call; lie down again.'" This happens to poor Samuel three times. Each time he gets up and goes to Eli, thinking it is Eli's voice he is hearing, when, in fact, it is God's voice.

Scripture tells us that "the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him", meaning Samuel. Keep in mind that Samuel was about eleven years old and had been with Eli most of that time. He trusted Eli and knew that Eli would instruct him in what to do.

Thankfully, Eli realised that Samuel had not understood that it was God calling to him, and told him to go and lie down and the next time he was called, he was to answer, "Speak, for your servant is listening" and thus began Samuel's education with God. God told Samuel some terribly bad news about his mentor Eli. And Samuel was hesitant to tell Eli. After all, he wouldn't want to hurt his mentor. He also wouldn't want to be rejected and sent away, as the temple was all he had ever known.

Eli, being a kind-hearted man, encouraged Samuel to share his conversation with God. Samuel was hesitant. Eli insisted and told him "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.' So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him."

Now, Eli was a kind-hearted and gentle man, however, he was also overindulgent with his sons. He did not heed God's words of warning through Samuel, and his son's eventually came to a violent end, the shock of which sent Eli backwards from a chair where he broke his neck and died.

In happier news, Samuel went on to grow and learn from Eli and from God. Samuel became the last judge to lead Israel. After Samuel's death, Israel was ruled by kings. Samuel was quite fortunate to hear the voice of God, something that most of us have not had the pleasure. God calls Samuel by name twice, something that is recorded as happening to only a handful of others.

The scene that is written for us today is very intimate. An old man is asleep in his bed when he is awakened by his young charge. Eli may have thought that Samuel was dreaming. Yet when it happened three times, and Eli had not heard God's voice calling to Samuel, he realised what was happening. He instructed Samuel in how to respond, which Samuel did, and received a horrible message, but also God's blessing.

How many of us have received God's blessing?
How many of us have heard the voice of God?

Don't you think life would be simpler if we could pray to God and receive a direct answer? Now, I don't mean praying for the lottery numbers or a parking space in front of the doctor's office. I mean those 'Dark Night of the Soul' prayers where we turn ourselves and our souls inside out, looking for guidance.

I do truly believe that God hears all prayers. Whether God actually answers is another thing. I know, in my 53 years I have yet to hear God say "Andrea, Andrea", although to be fair, if I heard that in the middle of the night, my response would likely be "WHATDYA WANT?" rather than "Speak, for your servant is listening".

I do believe that every one of us have received God's blessing. Perhaps not as intimately as Samuel. From the moment of our birth, when we draw in our first breath, when the "(ruach רוח)" spirit, breath or wind of God enters us; that is when we receive our soul, that is when we are each blessed by God.

And so, what does God expect in return? For some of us, we decide to dedicate our lives to God. For some of us, we dedicate our children's lives to God. Not all of us are called to be priests or ministers. Some of us are called to teach, or mentor, or nurse. Some of us are called to parent or grand-parent. Each of us has a role to play in the world. Call it our "purpose" if you will. A promise we make to give ourselves over to something greater than ourselves, and especially our egos.

When we consider good leadership, what does that look like to you? Would you rather follow a leader who is decisive and certain? Or one who shows their insecurity and inexperience? Would you rather a leader who is collaborative or one who is a "lone wolf"? This time of COVID has challenged all leaders, whether they lead a small town, a large city, a province or a country. And we have seen varying styles and efficacy of leaders.

For most Worship and Church leaders, we have been stretched to the point of being torn and tested to the brink of madness, and we continue, despite exhaustion, frustration and isolation, to do our best. Sometimes it's enough, sometimes it is not. None of us have been in this position before. I have said it before, and I will say it again, we are walking on this road as we pave it.

In the United States, on the 20th of January, a new President will be inaugurated along with a new Vice President. Their leadership styles are different from each other and yet both are very different from their predecessors. I hope and pray we will see sanity and reason, courage and humility return to the White House.

I pray that President Biden and Vice President Harris be blessed by God as both Eli and Samuel were. As Minister Adrian Dix and Dr. Bonnie Henry are. As we are.

I pray that we will each know that we are God's beloved children. And that we will share that love of God with all we meet, knowing that, in the words of the late Jack Layton, "love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic. And we'll change the world."

Monday is Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in the United States. He was ordained a Baptist pastor when he was 19 years old and was assassinated at age 39. One of my favourite quotes from him is from a sermon, in which he preached, "returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

And so, my brothers and sisters, let us illuminate our light to drive out darkness and hate. Let us choose to be loving, hopeful and optimistic. And together, with Eli, with Samuel, with Jack Layton and Martin Luther King Jr., we can, and we will, change the world.

Thanks be to God.

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Epiphany 2
1 Samuel 3.1-20