

God Calls Samuel (15Oct17)
1Samuel3:1-21

Amid God's strange way of speaking to us now, this reading makes clear that sermons aren't just for adults, and may speak especially to our children and youth.

It said, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." We'll say more about how to integrate that with our lives. For now, it's a fairly shocking change in the story. While we may wonder why God doesn't appear to us like God did in the Bible and our lives are so ordinary and not supernatural, in the story this may come as an unusual twist.

To see that, let's catch up on what we missed in the Narrative Lectionary. Last week we were hearing about manna, which came after God was dialoguing with Moses, and was—if not a vision—a pretty direct daily miracle from God. Plus, the people were following God's guidance in a pillar of cloud and fire through the wilderness.

After God spoke amid smoky thunder to give Moses the 10 Commandments, at the very end of the book of Exodus, those written laws were placed into a box called the Ark of the Covenant, and God's presence sat on that box. The pillar of cloud and fire moved in to the tent which served as the temporary holy of holies, the mobile worship center, to remain both visibly and audibly with the people, throughout the wilderness for those 40 years. Besides that direct presence of God, it extended to Moses, too, who had a glowing face from contact with God, so bright that he needed to wear a veil, like his time with God rubbed off on him.

From such obvious and miraculous depictions, it may seem disappointing it went away. As the people entered the Promised Land, God sort of disappeared. I mean, that's not exactly it. God wasn't really marginalized. God didn't just give guidelines to start the

community running and then abandon them to their own devices. Certainly the Bible still has words from God all through that section. But as the people are settling into the Promised Land, they sort of go about their business. Although we heard last week that even miraculous manna didn't resolve God's relationship with the people, throughout the time of Judges the connection deteriorated further, with them alternately straying from God and then being brought back.

Of course, they brought the box of God with them into the Promised Land. Though that Ark of the Covenant apparently no longer directly revealed God's presence, we may say it re-presented (represented?) God. That box is even there in the reading today. In odd language, it says that Samuel is sleeping by it "in the temple." Actually the temple won't be built for over a hundred years by King Solomon, as we'll hear in two weeks.

That temple will become the center of worship in Jerusalem, the place where God's presence was still believed to dwell with the box. Again, it no longer had mysterious stuff happening, or a vocal presence of God or a phenomenal appearance. As our reading indicated, that stuff was rare, even as the pomp and glorious architecture and political turmoil around the temple grew. The box became so special that only the high priest could go by it and only once per year. Even 29 centuries after it was constructed and 19 centuries after a second temple was destroyed, still that former location of the box is seen as the spot to get closest to God.

For all of that, today little Samuel is curled up near the box, just trying to get some sleep. But something keeps interrupting his snooze, snaps him out of his nap, has him tossing and turning.

Now, I want to try out a thought. It's not explaining away or dumbing down the story,

but it's a possibility I want you to consider. The image on the cover of your bulletin has a bright light streaming down from above a bed. First of all, Samuel probably wasn't in a bed like that, because he was sleeping near the box in the temple. Second, there probably wasn't a bright light. The reading sure didn't mention one. Another artwork I looked at amid bulletin possibilities showed an angel delivering the message, but no angel is mentioned, either.

... Unless we consider the angel to be old Eli.

One detail we did hear is that three times as Samuel is pondering this voice, three times he thinks it is Eli calling. I suppose you could explain that Eli was the only person around, so Samuel assumed it must be him. Or you could say that Eli's voice sounded like the voice of God—whether that means to you that it was deep and booming like Chuck Pils' reading or soft and gentle or kind of nasal-y and goofy sounding.

But here's my suggestion: maybe it was that Samuel was used to learning about God from Eli. He was used to hearing Eli's sermons, Sunday School lessons, bedtime prayers, and so the voice of the Lord was spoken from Eli's mouth to Samuel, the word of the Lord was articulated by an ordinary human tongue, and the angelic messenger on most days was Eli himself.

One reason I suggest that is, as we're two weeks away from the 500th anniversary of the start of the Lutheran Reformation, I find myself believing with Luther and the Reformers that this Eli perspective is the most likely experience. Our so-called Evangelical or good news-focused understanding is that faith comes from hearing. This resists and rejects the idea that you find God within you, that God offers messages nobody else has, that there is some sort of peculiar unique personal revelation.

Though you may typically imagine it otherwise, the early Lutherans said—and I'd continue to assert—that faith comes not from

our internal reflections when a shaft of light breaks on us in the night, not unmediated, but from a preacher, who can be somebody who sounds a lot like me and stand someplace like this. It could also be a mentor or Sunday School teacher, and should quite definitely be a parent, a baptismal sponsor. This is saying that God's process for working in us, is as faith is taught and learned. It is why we end Bible readings with the thankful reminder that you've just heard "the word of the Lord" (and maybe we should be saying before the readings "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening"). This reminds us it's not a sudden conversion in a rare vision but is mostly God's word spoken by human mouths

That included Eli's mouth. He was a Confirmation instructor and pastor and Bible professor and even an adoptive parent for Samuel. As Samuel grew up, Eli was telling and teaching him this faith, and the Holy Spirit was working through those words to create faith in Samuel, to use those very ordinary means for divine purposes. That is why I suggest that, when this child Samuel heard a call from God, he heard it as the voice of Eli.

And the call that Samuel was responding to was really just continuing what he knew of faith. He should've been taught about the will of God, about the care for relationships, about trying to live for what is right, to respect God, to be forgiving and not prejudiced, and so on. Or, as we summarize how we practice it here, as "living faithfully and lovingly with God, neighbor, and creation."

The previous chapter said the sons of Eli did the opposite. Depending on the Bible translation, they were wicked, scoundrels, worthless men. The Hebrew phrase literally says "the sons of Eli were sons of Belial," calling them the offspring of a personification of lacking in values, maybe like we'd say somebody was a no-good sonofa...gun. These guys were stealing

out of the offering plate and abusing people on their way to worship, and such misbehavior betrayed God's reputation.

Even as a child, Samuel knew his faith well enough to know that wasn't how it should be. He knew they were ungodly, doing wrong. It contradicted the story he'd been taught. So Samuel spoke the voice of God back to Eli.

The story we have been taught and that continues to be spoken into your ears to reinforce faith calls us also to resist evil, calls us to be on the side of life. It doesn't require cinematic magic for us to be compelled to act against injustice. We already trust that is what the voice of God asks of us. All of us.

So we know sermons are for children, that our young people learn and grow in these beliefs, in God's striving for goodness, for love, for justice, and against death. And our youth are not only passive learners, but also call the older of us back to faithfully living.

In some of these ways, I remember in 2nd grade trying to convince teachers we should recycle, and in 4th grade telling my uncle to quit smoking, and in 6th grade being against the war, and in 10th grade trying to improve how poor people in my community were treated.

But to admit continually I'm no hero and need faithful reminders as much as anybody, this week Mindi Bradt saw me pedaling by on my bicycle with my phone in my hand and shouted out, "Didn't they tell you about texting and driving?!"

Yes they did. And to be on the side of life, I need godly reminders and the grace to keep living into it. I've heard similar coercions in both sides of families here, of parents who urge kids to come to church, and also children who want to be here and drag their parents.

However it comes to pass, you gather here, in a place you may think of as holy or set apart, though it's so very ordinary. You come not for any miraculous phenomenon, not expecting

bright lights, knowing you're going to wind up hearing me, but still listening for God. This is how and often where God's voice is spoken to us, coming into our hearts, sometimes continuing to needle us in the night, knowing that we need to do something, to change situations around us. For Samuel, it was a call to offer that challenging word. For Eli, it was a word of being challenged, called to account. For you, this sermon is a reminder of God's voice speaking right now into your life. For all of us, the oldest to the youngest, it is a call to live in this relationship together.