

Between Text and Sermon

1 Samuel 3:1–20

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1 SAMUEL 3 INVITES the preacher to help the members of her or his congregation consider the ways in which they relate to one another as they respond to God’s purpose and call in light of changing circumstances.

The eleventh century BCE, a time of significant transition in Israel, provides the setting of the story of Samuel. Heretofore, charismatic leaders known as judges had led the loosely organized tribes. After the turn of the century, monarchs ruled a more formally organized nation. Samuel would be the last of the judges, and the first to anoint Israel’s kings, namely Saul and David.

1 Samuel 3 contains the narrative of the call of Samuel. This narrative, along with its broader literary context, invites the preacher to consider it as the story of a smaller transition within a larger transition. The larger transition moves from the period of the judges to the period of the monarchs. The smaller one moves from one leader to another, from Eli to Samuel.

One potentially fruitful way to approach this text is to consider the kinds of “larger” transitions that the people of God face today. Like Israel in the eleventh century BCE, the church finds itself living through immense change. The individual preacher may wish to take account of the localized and global social and political shifts that are influencing the lives of her or his congregation, and of the different ways in which parishioners perceive these changes. Those who listen to sermons know the world is changing, and the knowledge brings both hope and fear.

That this text can continue to speak to God’s people in times of change is underscored by the role of the text as scripture. The text speaks at the level of its literary setting, addressing the transition from tribal confederacy to monarchy. It speaks at the level of its setting within the deuteronomic history, as the exiles prepare for the anticipated changes in their situation. It speaks at the level of its setting in Christian scripture as Christians deal with the changing world around them.

After pondering such “larger” transitions, the preacher may consider the “smaller” transitions that continually take place in the congregation. The story of the call of Samuel concentrates on such a “smaller” transition, that in leadership from Eli to Samuel. Eli served as priest at the Shiloh sanctuary, where the ark of the covenant was kept. His sons Hophni and Phinehas assisted him. The boy

Samuel was being raised by Eli at Shiloh. One night, as he tried to sleep in the sanctuary, Samuel heard the voice of the Lord. Many differences existed between Eli and Samuel, the most significant difference being generational. Eli was old; Samuel was young. Eli's leadership role was decreasing; Samuel's was increasing. An important theological distinction is made between the two figures, as well. Eli has ceased hearing the word of the Lord, while Samuel has just begun.

Some scholars, analyzing future trends in the church, maintain that generational differences and conflict will become a characteristic feature of many congregations. Indeed, many churches now target specific demographic groups in planning their common life and mission, while others struggle to listen to all the different groups within their congregations. In various ways, churches struggle to deal with change. One struggle involves making the transition from one generation of leadership to another. In his 1961 inaugural address, President Kennedy proclaimed, "Let the word go forth . . . that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans." These words probably caused panic in some people and exhilaration in others.

In dealing with this text the preacher could attempt to approach it from the perspective of both Eli and Samuel, being sensitive to the ways in which different parishioners hear the text. While the Bible does not address the leadership of Eli apart from the Samuel story, we can perhaps assume that he had been an effective leader. Still, Eli's decline parallels Samuel's rise. The text communicates Eli's negative situation both overtly and subtly. Chapter 2 notes that Eli has lost control of his sons who are abusing their position of leadership. Also, a "man of God" tells Eli that his family will lose the priesthood and that it will be given to another. This judgment is based primarily on the sin of Eli's sons and Eli's failure to do anything about it.

The symbolism in the text also communicates Eli's declining situation. We are told that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread" (3:1), and in the following verse that the eyesight of Eli "had begun to grow dim so that he could not see." Perhaps Eli's encroaching physical blindness is paralleled by his increasing spiritual blindness. Nevertheless, Eli exercises his insight as well and as long as he can. When Samuel hears the voice of God calling him and mistakenly believes that he is being addressed by Eli, the youngster makes three treks to Eli's room to see what his superior wants. Eli "perceived that the Lord was calling the boy," and gives Samuel valuable counsel (3:9). So Eli shares his insight with Samuel and serves as mentor to him even as he confronts his own uncertain future.

Eli's response to God's address to Samuel accentuates the fact that Eli's insight is not entirely diminished (v. 18). Perhaps Eli's devoted submission to the new thing that God is about to do is a fitting memorial to the priest. As churches encounter their changing situation with its corresponding generational tensions, Eli is at this point a model for dealing with reality. As churches encounter

change and transition, perhaps Eli's helpfulness to Samuel offers guidance. We see here, if you will, a passing of the baton. As in any successful relay race, care and cooperation at this juncture are critical to completing the course. We shall need to be attentive to those who are both grieving for that which is passing away and celebrating that which lies ahead.

When this text is examined from Samuel's perspective, different though sometimes related emphases emerge. Seeing the story from Samuel's perspective also creates a good opportunity to consider the text in the context of its lectionary placement. The lectionary suggests using this story on the second Sunday after Epiphany, which is also the Sunday following the remembrance of the Baptism of our Lord. The Gospel lesson for that Sunday is the calling of Philip and Nathanael by Jesus in John 1:43–51. The preacher could consider the theological and ethical implications of hearing and responding to Christ's call to discipleship.

Samuel's preparation for his call is worthy of consideration. Like many parishioners, Samuel "grew up in the church." His mother Hannah had promised him to the Lord, and she had brought him to Shiloh to be raised by Eli. When he heard God's voice, Samuel "was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was" (3:3). Some have suggested that Samuel was performing an incubation ritual, attempting to create a situation in which the revelation of God might come to him and bring to an end the current drought of vision (cf. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, OTL [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964] 41). Here the text may present an opportunity for the preacher to lead the congregation in considering the ethical implications of the ways in which we prepare our young people to hear the call of God in their lives. There is a fine line between creating opportunities and manipulating circumstances. Still, the tenor of the text is positive; Samuel is about to have the experience toward which his entire life has been moving. Worshipers young and old should have their lives opened up to similar possibilities.

The nature of Samuel's call as a process could also be considered. Samuel begins with a natural misunderstanding, confusing the voice of God with the voice of Eli, not once but three times. (There are things here to ponder: When are the words of other disciples, particularly leaders, the words of God? When do we hear God but think we hear someone else? When do we think someone's words are the words of God when they in fact are not?) Samuel moves to a position of responding to God after being advised by his mentor, Eli. Eli gives sound advice even after receiving the word about the impending end of his leadership role. Finally, Samuel recognizes the voice of God for what it is and responds by stating his willingness to listen. This experience of Samuel, which lasts for one night, can be offered as a paradigm for the life of discipleship: over and over, we move from misunderstanding to readiness to response.

The preacher may, in light of Samuel's experience, reflect on an ethic of

acting on God's call. Some ambiguities emerge. For example, God does not tell Samuel anything he is to do. The word is a reaffirmation of what the Lord has already told Eli he is going to do in bringing an end to Eli's house. The role Samuel is to play in filling the void left when Eli's house falls is implicit, and we might well wonder whether Samuel fully appreciates the subtlety. Sometimes when people sense a call from God there is struggle in understanding all of its implications.

Indeed, "Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli" (v. 15). His reaction is understandable. Might Samuel's "fear" also be based on his respect for Eli? If Samuel understands that as Eli decreases he will increase, he is not anxious to seize what will be his before it is time. He respects the role and feelings of his mentor. As roles change in the church, and as one generation gives way to another, conflicts may emerge. Sensitivity and respect for others are appropriate as disciples respond to "new" calls from God. Indeed, the ideal is partnership. As Walter Brueggemann has said regarding Samuel and Eli, "Now the two of them stand together to face the hard, powerful will of Yahweh" (*First and Second Samuel*, IBC [Louisville: John Knox, 1990] 26). Finally, that is how and where the many disciples and varied generations in the church should stand.

Mark 3:20–35

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"People will be forgiven for all their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter" (Mark 3:28).

SUPPOSE YOU HEAR SOME WILD CLAIMS about how "God is at work" in that church across town. People's lives are being affected. Some, perhaps, in slow and steady ways. Yet these are never immediately obvious, and so what gets in the papers are these embarrassing incidents that make your friends smirk about just how bizarre religious people can be.

What would you do to stop it? Maybe not much, if you guessed it could be ignored, left isolated in some neighborhood that doesn't matter to you. But suppose it's happening in your own congregation? What if it's someone in your own family? What would you do to bring this embarrassment to an end? Would you question the intelligence or the wisdom of the people involved? "Yeah, well, my brother's always been a little crazy. Although I have to say he's never gone quite this far off the deep end before."

But what if you couldn't laugh it off? What do you do as the embarrassment



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