

Sunday, January 14, 2018

Central Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon



A Sermon Preached by
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Play It Again Sam

I Samuel 3:1-10

A bit of background may help. Hannah was childless and she was anxiously praying to the Lord in front of Eli, one of the older priests of the Temple. Eli scolded her for what appeared to be drunken behavior instead of considered prayer but she assured Eli that was not the case, that she had been praying for a son. He then blessed her and sent her on her way with the assurance that God would grant her prayer. She went home and, the story says she knew her husband and Samuel was conceived.

It's a quaint custom, a relic from a distant past, something inconceivable to us: but first-born sons were offered to the priesthood in exchange for God giving them a child. So Samuel was delivered to Eli as a young child to be raised for service as a priest.

Our passage this morning begins by telling us that "The word of the Lord was rare in those days..." The author of this narrative is trying to politely say that things are not going well for religion. God had been silent for a long time can be paraphrased by saying that religion was losing its positive influence on the culture and the leaders were finding it hard to envision how to make religion relevant to the time. People were just going through the motions.

The passage describes Eli's eyesight as growing dim and whose energy was lagging so that he had to lay down in his room. I can empathize with Eli as I grow older. I keep having to upgrade my glasses and my bedtime gets earlier every year.

However, I think that the narrator is more interested in describing the state of religion than he is the state of Eli's health. I think the author is trying to say that the state of the Temple is directly related to leadership's ability to hear a new word from the Lord.

Did you know that only about five percent of Christian ministers in all Protestant denominations in North America today are under the age of 35? Willie Nelson taught my generation well "Mama, don't let your babies grow up to be preachers. Don't let 'em drink grape juice and baptize old drunks. Let 'em be doctors and lawyers and such." Well, judging by the number of young people applying to law school and medical school compared to divinity school, we're doing a pretty good job of directing our kids away from the ministry.

Now you could say that the church hasn't needed any help directing young people away from careers in the church. We've done a good job of looking like the last place young people might

want to land. Scandals and slanders left and right, from the left and from the right, infighting and backbiting, too tight on some things and too loose on others, too out-of-date in some ways and too up-to-date in others, too worldly and not enough at the same time. We get it wrong in lots of ways. But that has never been uncommon. Eli's own sons, who he had trained up to be priests were, according to the narrative, involved in scandalous behavior. You can read about that in chapter 2 beginning with the 22nd verse.

So I don't think it would be a stretch to say that the "word of the Lord is rare" in our generation too. The religious and spiritual impulse seems buried in the culture's secularism. And, I think that many of us in Christian vocation are tiring even as our eyesight is dimming while the culture changes at a dizzying pace.

But if this passage of scripture is going to teach us anything, it is that we must work harder at helping new leaders, young leaders to hear the voice of God's call and answer it.

In the Presbyterian Church, we need to come to grips with the truth that we are aging and we find it hard to attract and nurture young people into the ministry of the church.

While it would be foolish to be too critical of Eli or of the leaders of the Presbyterian Church, let's be honest that Samuel, who has not yet met the Lord at the time of his calling, has to repeatedly come to Eli, saying "Here I am" before Eli finally admits that Samuel was hearing the Lord's call. Time after time Samuel comes to Eli suggesting he had called and Eli failed to confirm it.

There are a lot of ways the church also says to our young people – go back to sleep, I did not call you. When they hear the call, the church fails to confirm it. You're too young, you're missing the point, you're rough around the edges, too much passion too little wisdom...

Given this story maybe one of the things we can learn is to listen more carefully to the voices of our younger generations. We must get them around our decision-making tables and we have to work harder to confirm the call of God in their lives. I'm not just talking about young people who may hear the call to become ministers and Christian educators, but young people who hear God calling them to become involved in the lives of their neighbors.

It is too bad that we go through these long dry spells when we cannot hear the word of the Lord. I don't really think it is because God isn't calling but because we aren't listening.

God has been calling the church to become inclusive for so many years -- First to ordain women into the leadership of the church, then African Americans, now LGBTQ members. Because we have been so slow to hear this call, the name Christian is associated with attempts to roll back tolerance in American secular culture as well.

We keep telling Samuel to go lay back down when we should be saying, "here we are" as Samuel was attempting to say to God. God keeps having to say the same word to us over and over again because we are so slow to hear and confirm the call we've been hearing for generations.

There are two things that I think make it hard for the church to hear the Word of the Lord. The first is that we have expectations that are too high. We mislead ourselves into thinking that leaders have to be perfect before they can be leaders. We want ministers and leaders in the church to meet expectations that are impossible to meet.

With today's social media most of us wear our strengths and our weaknesses on our sleeves. It is just too common for elders to frown on the behavior of young people while hiding their own flaws under the veil of moral perfection. This has been too long the stance of the church – to expect perfection from our leaders.

I know a young, bright, and imaginative clergy person who is questioning her call. She has been shamed by some members for holding a Bible Study at a pub and drinking beer, for using curse words in media posts, for having a different political perspective than others in the congregation and living in a marriage that is challenged by the complexities of serving her church, managing a distant relationship with a spouse who is going to school elsewhere, and raising a special needs child. This young person, rather than being supported by her community and encouraged in ministry is questioning whether she has even heard the call of God. How many times will God call and the church tell its young leaders to go back a lay down?

One reason for including the prayer of confession in worship each week is to remind church people-including us paid Christians- that we are plagued by the same temptations and failings as everyone else. We're just flesh and blood human beings. Yet, according to this story,

that's all God asks us to be. Human beings for God's sake. We are sinners in the hands of a loving God. Nothing more or less.

There's plenty wrong with the church and its leaders, but take it from one on the inside, there's plenty right with it too. I see all the problems; I have to look in the mirror every morning. But the church is still where people find the life that really is life. This is where people are treasured for who they are apart from the size of their treasure. This is where people stand up for justice and speak up for the voiceless. This is where we practice on each other how to love our neighbor so that we'll do better next Friday when the guy next door leaves his trash in the alley-again.

The second thing that makes it hard to hear the Word of the Lord in our times is that we tend to speak God's word into a void. That is to say we speak about things nobody is interested in. We're still talking about television violence when the world is dealing with mass shootings, gun violence and terrorism. We are still talking about abortion while the world needs to hear about survival of the planet. We are still talking about drunkenness while the world is struggling with its addiction to consumerism. We're still talking about sex when the world is struggling with what it means to love a neighbor. We are talking about creeds when the world wants to know how to live with diversity. We are still fostering tribalism when the world is learning to live with globalism.

If it has been a long time since we have heard a word from the Lord maybe it is because we aren't listening well to our young. They have an ear for the future. They have an ear for what the

Lord is calling the church to do and be, not only today but into the future.

Eli makes a huge sacrifice. When he finally confirms Samuel's call from God, he also listens when Samuel tells him the fate of his family. They have led the church for a long time but, because they have not heard God's word for so long, Eli's fate is one of judgement. And he receives it with grace, as if he knew, that the time had come for him to turn over the ministry of the Temple to Samuel.

Is there anything we can learn as an aging Presbyterian church from this story? I think there is. We must trust God even if it means handing over the ministry to new generations.

Letting go feels like a judgement. I'm discouraged that during the ministry of my generation we have been unable to transition the church into a meaningful partner with our culture. We, like Moses, who led the people through the wilderness and died before reaching the promised land, may have to be content with our ministry of presence in this time of post-modern exodus. But, like our parents in faith, may we trust that the God of history is leading us

all, in every time and place, toward the fulfillment of God's will.

When Samuel heard the call of God he said, "Here I Am." When he finally recognized it as God's call, the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." I'm listening Lord, I want my ears to tingle with hope. May the church partner with God so that the word of the Lord may be heard by our young and confirmed by our support, even if what we are hearing is that God is taking the church to different place.