

I Samuel 3: 1-20

Woah! This is WONDERFUL material. Real – exciting – troubling – challenging – it cuts through the layers of superficial clutter and gets right to the quick; the place of feelings, and where the moist and fertile heart of what really matters beats with hope.

This is the living breathing word of God – whatever else you do, don't underestimate this book.

The story of Samuel and Eli for example.

There are so many sermons in there...just falling out all over the place and I just had to pick one and go with it.

Layers of meaning here....simply as story it is magnificent. It has the quality of all good stories...polished and honed by the mouths and tongues of countless storytellers over the years. It has the elements of a seasoned, delicious tale....sweet in the mouth of the teller and deeply satisfying to those who sop up every drop as they listen.

This story would satisfy someone who was a Jungian analyst,
Would offer challenge and hope to someone doing political and social critique....
Would speak to anyone on a personal spiritual quest
And feed those who are busy caring for a job and family and a church.

If I do nothing else today in this sermon, I will have done my job if I invite you to jump head first into this story – splash around – let it soak into your being. This story is for YOU. So let's dive in.

Read 1-10

The first verse alone is enough for a whole sermon! Don't you think? "The word of the Lord was rare in those days" – Did you know that there were times in Scripture when God's word was rarely spoken? Do you think THIS is such a time? What makes for a time when God's word is spoken and when it is not? Is it a matter of God not speaking....or us not listening.....and how do we know when the voice is God and when it's not? When would you say there was a time when the Word wasn't spoken? In your lifetime? What made it a time like that...wouldn't that be a great sermon? But that's not what this one is about so...moving on....

Eli was made of better stuff than many of us.
Why do I say that?

Think of him: He's a priest. And a judge. He's been in those positions for many years. There was a time, a good, long time – when Eli was respected. What he said was taken very seriously. The people asked for his advice and he gave it, they knew he had wisdom. They trusted him to know the voice and will of God.

He was good at it, too. Honest, faithful, hardworking....doing his best to serve the people over a long time.

It hadn't been easy.

Being a priest and judge is not picnic...it takes its toll physically and emotionally.

And gradually, the fire that he used to have burning inside him....the conviction, the drive, the passion, the stamina, the certainty....

Well...maybe it's part of aging, but along with his eyesight, these things had begun to grow dim, until he couldn't see anymore. He just couldn't see.

However that happens to people,

Whatever the reasons,

That is just sad.

To see a person, who has once been a major force – a strong presence – a respected and powerful voice in the community – to see them lose it? Sad. Their time is over. There are newcomers to the community and children who simply don't recognize their names. No sense of who these people are and what they've meant

That was happening to Eli.

And when he thought of the future –

Well it was hard to even think about it, because his 2 sons, who were meant to carry on after him?

Those 2 boys he'd never been able to do anything with them.

Hophni and Phineas. If THEY were the future, then there was no future at all

(1Samuel 2: 12-17; 22-25)

He had become angry inside. Deeply angry, but unable to admit that even to himself.

It came out though in unexpected ways. He didn't have patience with people any more. Once, a woman had come to the temple to pray and he had accused her of being drunk.

1: 9-18

He felt terrible – he hadn't meant to snap at her or judge her like that

And that pointed out to him how far he had moved from the time when he was a young priest, full of the energy it took to be with people in a real way.

That encounter made him feel something else, though – a strange sort of hope.

Something in Hannah's voice and the look in her eyes and she stood up to his accusations made him....well...hopeful.

That woman was really something.

She returned too, with her baby boy just barely weaned, several months later.

Here's how it happened:

1Sam 1: 19-28, 2:11, 18-21

Maybe there WAS a future after all. And even if that future didn't include him, it still belonged to God. Having that child in the temple, even though it was a lot more work (picture old Eli with a 3 year old day and night...it sure changed life around the temple!)

It gave him a kind of spring in his step and an awareness of things that he hadn't had for a long time.

And when the Voice finally came
It came to Samuel, not to him.

And even though he knew his time was past;
That it was over for him.
In his long life's work there was no more time to add, no "next time I'll do it better" – it was over.
And much was still wanting.
The future he had planned would not come to pass...

Still, he had the grace in the end to see that the voice was still there,
That God called not him but a child

Eli saw what was happening and accepted it and encouraged the boy to understand it too

And that's why I say he's made of better stuff than many of us.

And part of the sweet pain of this story is
That as we read it we know that in the end
The same thing happened to the boy Samuel when he got old.

Life is a very strange thing.
Strange, and profoundly blessed. And wondrously holy.

If you were to take this story and apply it to your life – how would it fit?
Do you identify more with Eli or Sam? Or the sons of Eli? Or Hannah? Who are you and who are the other characters in your life? Eli the old priest whose time is gone? Hophni and Phineas, who were supposed to be the hope for the future but who proved themselves unworthy of it? Hannah the one who dares to believe and who names her deepest desire aloud....Samuel, young, willing to be guided....

These characters are in your life. You know who they are. And who you are. Does this help you see things differently?

There's another way to see it too though – what if all those characters ARE you?
Different parts of you/ What would the story say then?

Certainly, whoever you are, there is part of you whose time is past. Your childhood? A memory? Someone who has died? A relationship? A set of values? A stage in your life? What in your life – what part of you is Eli? Old now, and having to recognize that the past is over? What part of you is getting ready to die?

Even as you think about that, you need to know that inside you also is Samuel....the new life, that part of you able and eager to hear and grow and serve and thrive. The two go together. Always. Death then life, then death, then life....

Eli, Samuel, Eli, Samuel,...always.

Where is the new life in you?

What is growing, listening, aware, sighted?

And can that part of you learn from the older dying part, to better identify and interpret the truth? The Word?

And what in you is Hannah – the part of you that believes beyond logic that there can and will be a future? The part of you that will wait with fierce patience, will voice your needs and stand up when the old part says that you are foolish, that you are drunk, that you should go away from your hope? The part that will bring the new life to birth? Where is she in you?

If you were to be totally honestly with yourself about who you are and what you deeply desire and where your life is now,
How might this story help you to see it clearly and hear the voice of God coming in the night?

All too introspective for you??? Too Dr Phil?

Ok then, that's ok. Let's look at the church.

This I don't need to spell out, do I?

When you think of this congregation or the whole UCC...where is Eli, where is Samuel, and where is Hannah, the new life bringer? What has to go, so that new life can begin? Where IS new life? And where are those who passionately pray for it and stand up on their hind legs to defend and hope for this place when others would say you are a fool?

There is lots of work going on in all churches ...rethinking structures, doctrines, asking what weighs us down and keeps us from the new life that the Gospel is really about....is it doctrine? Buildings and property? What?

The bottom line is this: When God speaks, the Voice often comes in the most unexpected ways and to the most unexpected people. AND when it seems as though something has ended,

When it seems as though it's over,

God speaks in new and surprising ways and takes us into the future.

May God bless you as you think about these things

Amen