

The Christmas season is now officially in our rearview mirror, but the story of Jesus' birth, of course, is forever etched in our memories. God decided to do a new and great thing that would change the course of salvation history. And, God chose to make this extraordinary change through the life of a little boy. Today's Old Testament text from First Samuel is another example of how God changed the course of history through the life of a little boy, Samuel.

To better understand how we arrived at today's text, we need to look back to Samuel's mother, Hannah, recorded for us chapters 1 and 2. The book of Samuel opens with a conflict between Hannah who is childless, and Peninnah, who has many children. Both of them were wives to El-kay-na. Hannah was chided by the women in her community because of her infertility, especially by Peninnah, who is behaving like her rival. At one point, Hannah decided she had had enough of the chiding and name calling. Scripture records her next action in the story, as , "Hannah rose." I know I've said this from the pulpit before, but if Tom and I had had a second daughter, Hannah Rose would have been a great and strong name for her. Motherhood was so closely tied to a woman's identity back in the day, and Hannah ached for child, so much so, she goes to Shiloh and prays for a child at the sanctuary where Eli is a priest. Her request is for a son, which is realized for her in the birth of Samuel. Actually, Hannah bargained with God, saying, "God, if you give me a son, I will give him back to you. He shall drink neither wine or intoxicants and no razor shall touch her head." Chapter 2, then, begins with Hannah's song which celebrates the power of God to answer prayer and to initiate salvation. (not unlike Mary's song, the Magnificat, which we remember from the Christmas story). Hannah sings how God can bring the arrogant low and break the bows of the mighty, and conversely, God can strengthen the weak and feed the hungry. Notice that reversal – the arrogant will be made low and the weak will be made strong. Hannah herself celebrated this reversal in her life by remembering God's power to make an infertile woman, pregnant.

It's not unusual for biblical characters to be paired in contrasting situation, so that while one is on the rise, another is on the decline. Hannah was on the rise, Peninnah was on the decline. Or in today's story Samuel, who's now being called by God, is on the rise and Eli, who's eyesight has begun to grow dim, is on the decline. Samuel is the future for Israel. We'll soon see that God's message for Eli and his sons is that they will become history.

For as long as I've been at this church, the preachers have preached from the lectionary, not always, but much of the time. The lectionary is a set of assigned texts from the Old and New Testament for each Sunday and other high holy days. Like most things, there are advantages and disadvantages. I like preaching from the lectionary; I find it disciplined and ordered. On the other hand, most of the Bible doesn't make it into the lectionary, leaving many stories, I presume, to be studied in Bible classes and elsewhere. On occasion one of the lectionary texts will include verses that are parenthetical. The preacher can choose whether or not she wishes to include them. In today's text just including the first 10 verses gives us a lovely story of God's call to Samuel. Adding the parenthetical verses turns the story into one of judgment, or as Presbyterian Roger Gench calls it, one of accountability. He goes on to elaborate how Eli's sons abused their power as priests, and today's story is about God holding them accountable, about speaking truth to power. [Presbyterian Outlook column, 01/17/21] These additional verses convey God's judgment on Eli and his house. Eli's sons were abusing their priestly powers. God was not happy. Samuel would be their future, and Eli, whether you interpret his waning eyesight to be a physical one or a spiritual one, his light is about out.

Eli was complicit to his sons actions. God held Eli and his house accountable. Jesus held his challengers accountable. Today, we also see the need for accountability. There are lots of things to learn from the events on January 6<sup>th</sup> at the Capitol. One of those things - what we do and say, matters. We will be held accountable for our words and actions. We hold people of

power accountable. Politicians, to be sure, but also, religious leaders need to be held accountable; the media are held accountable. Along with power comes responsibility. There are earthly consequences to our sin.

As I recall, what's going on in Israel around them is also significant. The people were clambering for a king. Up until then, with God as the head, there were judges and a powerful priesthood, including Eli. The people wanted a king, like all the other countries! Even with the divine warnings that a king will demand you pay taxes and will demand you defend him with your life, the people still wanted a king. So a king they shall have. Samuel will become the prophet during this time of transition from judges, and will anoint Kings Saul and David.

At the end of today's story, Samuel was reluctant to tell Eli what God had said to him. Sensing his reluctance, Eli told Samuel to give it to him straight. Samuel did and hid nothing. The story ends with Eli saying, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good."

As a young pastor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. may have felt more than a little like Samuel, hearing the word of the Lord and being caught up in a vision of God's kingdom. Like Samuel going to Eli in the morning, Dr. King must have felt fear that what he knew he had to say would not be gladly received by many. Yet, Eli knew, and we know, that the word of the Lord will always prevail. King knew that he was put in a place in a special time because God had a use for him. He wanted a quiet life as a professor. Through an odd turn of events, as young pastor he was thrust into the forefront of the Montgomery bus boycott. After a contentious series of public meeting and confrontations Martin had heard his name called to stand up for justice, to be "the drum major for righteousness."

Premier Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, writes about Samuel and Eli: "This is a season of naivete when a young boy can receive a vision, an old man can embrace a relinquishment, a surprised mother can sing a song, the ears of the conventional can tingle, and life begins again. A new beginning means a terrible ending of some other arrangements. As we shall see, Samuel subsequently grows vexed and irascible about those endings, but not now, not here. This new beginning required facing candidly all that has failed, and this narrative does that without flinching or deceiving." [Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel, p.28]

"As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord." Amen.