

Sermon: January 28, 2024 - 1 Samuel 3: 1-18

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Once upon a time, figuring out your calling in life was something largely done in your late teens and early twenties. You would determine what kind of training or other preparation you needed to do after High School, would get apprenticeships or summer jobs related to the career you were preparing for, and that would be that. If your calling was primarily to be a parent and manage a multiplicity of things on the home front, again, you may have had that figured out by your twenties, too. One way or another, it was a big decision, typically made once.

Nowadays, it makes almost no sense to speak of a single calling in one's life, because it is so common for people to change careers multiple times, preparing for the next career even while in the middle of your current one. And not only is one's career likely to change, so the way you relate to the world in general is certain to change over time. And if this is true for us as individual human beings, how much more extreme are the changes for Churches, as we seek ways to make relevant connections with a society that is so very different than it was in years gone by. Re-considering God's call for our lives, then, personally and communally, is a good thing to do periodically, if not perpetually. After all, planet earth itself is in a state of constant change, and we see adaptiveness even in God; why would us humans expect to remain static?

We have before us this morning one of the classic call stories. Classic, yet with some surprises. Young Samuel, presented by his mother Hannah to be raised at the Tabernacle in Shiloh, hears his voice called three times in the night, and three times he finds his feet and goes to his master, Eli. The Tabernacle was basically deserted at that time of night, so who else, pray tell, could be calling his name? Eli, not at his best due to these interruptions to sleep, doesn't initially recognize these callings as coming from God, nor does young Samuel. Once it happens a third time, Eli directs the young lad to answer the next time, "Speak, for your servant is listening." Samuel, thus prepared, answers the fourth time he is called, and his path takes new shape, as the last ruling Judge and the first Prophet.

So at this point, what do we have in front of us?

Samuel is young – perhaps twelve, according to tradition – and has this high calling in front of him. He is already under the care of the experienced priest, Eli, and now the mentoring can be even fuller. The future, confirmed by God, looks bright, even hopeful.

Eli, meanwhile, is nearly ninety. How heartwarming for him to hear that his young ward was destined to serve God. Again, lots of warm fuzzies here, as a lifetime of experience bears fruit. I'm on the verge of saying, well done, good and faithful servant.

But such unbridled optimism is not how the story goes, not at all. There is heavy lifting to be done here, by both Eli and Samuel. In the first four chapters of 1st Samuel, it is laid out in no uncertain terms that there was a big problem at the Tabernacle, and the problem was the sons of Eli.

Everyone knew that Eli's sons were scoundrels. Pretty much nothing was too low for these guys, from eating the nicely-roasted food offered on the altar before it completely burned up, to coercing sexual favours from women who had come to pray. Eli was in a state of denial that his sons could do such things but yes, they could and they did, and a holy messenger confirms this for Eli. As for Samuel, one might think that the first prophecy God would give him would be a "warm up" message, something nice and happy and easy, but no, this ugly

thing about the sons of Eli was the first thing presented to this twelve year old budding prophet to deal with.

So while I'd love to be able to say that both Eli and Samuel were going to experience nothing but sunshine and light following Samuel's call story, it looks a bit more like "misery loves company" might be the theme of the day. And with that sad reality, and my overall mood sinking a bit, Eric Fistler, Robb McCoy, and Bryan Odeen, in their weekly "Pulpit Fiction" podcast, have shared a model for reflecting on this that I found really, really helpful.

Their model is an intergenerational one. Relative to Samuel's call, they note "both Eli and Samuel are needed for God's call to be heard and responded to. Samuel hears it, but Eli understands it." In facing the miserable truth about the sons of Eli, they note that "Eli seems almost relieved" to have his worst fears confirmed about what his adult sons have been up to while functioning as priests, and Samuel is tasked with reforming not just these guys but the priesthood in general, so that similar abuses would not happen again.

There's a telling line in this scripture, in verse 1: "The LORD's word was rare at that time, and visions weren't widely known." The podcasters, Eric, Robb and Bryan, wonder aloud whether this meant that God was mostly silent, or, more likely, that Eli's sons had no interest in what God was saying, the light was burning so dimly for Eli that he could no longer see or hear what God needed him to do, and Samuel was just starting. In this, Eli encourages and teaches young Samuel to do what he is no longer able to do: to learn to listen attentively, because God is ALWAYS speaking, especially when it comes to speaking truth to power.

In any line of interpretation of this scripture, there is the danger of falling into ageism, generalizing and assuming that Samuel is automatically a go-getter just because of his age, and that Eli is worn out and past it because of his age. Fortunately, God sees beyond that, giving Samuel the kind of message one might not expect to be given to a beginner, and counting on Eli, even with all the bad things that his sons did that escaped his notice, to put his wisdom and experience to use in helping Samuel to develop spiritually. In ways we would and would not expect, Samuel and Eli, at very different points of life and ministry, work together to everyone's mutual benefit.

As a Church, the needs and yearnings of the communities and world around us will always intersect with the ability and capacity of the faith community at varying angles with the passage of time. The overall age and stage of Church and community don't move at the same pace! And our individual callings and capacities also change. Last Sunday, after our Worship service, we had a very productive meeting upstairs, giving some shape to our burgeoning Spirituality and Aging initiative. And my oh my, did we ever get a great response. Sixteen of us shared what it is, as we age, that feeds our souls – things we do to help us be spiritually healthy, things we are yearning to do, things we once did and now find more difficult. Here's a word map that shows some of the more common words that were shared: music, reading, physical activity, family, deepening friendships, meeting new people, coming to Church, travel, learning, searching, writing & journaling, reaching beyond self, and, yes, facing and becoming more comfortable with death. That's far less than half the words that were shared, which gives our Spiritual Explorations team a lot to work with! Some of the words are introspective, some are robust, some are physically active, some are socially active, some are things we are confident about, some of them require that we reach and stretch and learn. A few of them are things one might do on one's own but many of them are best done in community, from book studies to going for walks together to cooking classes, and while

framed within the experience of aging not all of these will only gather a community of folks who are about the same age.

So much of this Spirituality and Aging work speaks directly into the way that our callings change with time, and the ways that our calls from God will become even fuller when complemented by the gifts, abilities, and callings of another. I am so pleased that Isabelle had her “aha!” moment – one might even call it a calling...! - and that we have an off-site encourager named Rev Dr Jane Kuepfer who does academic and practical work on this exact field, the Spirituality of Aging, at the University of Waterloo and has been so generous with her resources and time and knowledge. This is work I happily come alongside in my last few months with you, knowing that this work is of the Spirit and will reach far into the future.

When we look back at the story of Eli and Samuel, which (as Anthropologist Steven L. Olsen reminds me) happened at a pivotal time in the narrative of ancient Israel, just as the days of the Judges were ending and the days of the Prophets and Kings were beginning, we gain encouragement for this pivotal, liminal time we are in. Religious life in Canada needs to find what it is going to look like five years from now, ten years from now, even two years from now; our planet desperately needs humanity to figure out its priorities; a troubling worldwide drift away from respectful dialogue must find a new path; and on a smaller scale, this Community of Faith is at a time when articulating what the things that do and will feed your soul, together, as one small but integral part of the body of Christ, will help shape how you relate to the towns, villages and hamlets of the upper Bow Valley, how you relate to one another, and what kind of Leader you will call to come alongside you amidst that unfolding.

I’m one of those folks who can point to a very specific time and place when God first called me to Minister to others – a call experience at age 20 that I wouldn’t fully equate with what Samuel experienced, but of that same ilk – and yet even with that singular experience, the road I have followed has had many twists and turns, fresh callings, and learnings acquired by success and failure, action and reflection, joy and embarrassment and everything in between. God continues to actively engage you and us and the world as a whole, sometimes with upbeat news where we will eagerly say, “Speak, your servant is listening” and other times when we are challenged to find a fresh, healthy path. All of it relates to our calling, and the way we continually work that out with God and within communities of faith. Every bit of it, the hard stuff and the easy stuff, is part of this beautiful, holy gift called life. May God be praised! Amen.

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