

The Call of Samuel

We have jumped a long ways from last week's reading. In last week's story, God provided manna for the Israelites in the wilderness. Since then, they completed their wilderness journey – sort of a 40-year family vacation gone wrong. The generation after the one that left Egypt finally entered Canaan under the leadership of Joshua.

The tabernacle – or tent of meeting – which traveled with them through the whole journey, has been set up in Shiloh. That's the setting for today's story.

After entering Canaan, each tribe of Israel went to a different territory to claim their inheritance. They were ruled by tribal leaders called judges.

Their main jobs were to bring order, and to protect the people against hostile neighbors. They were to lead their people in fulfillment of God's covenant with them.

Most of the judges were corrupt. There's a repeated cycle in the book of Judges...because of corruption and failure to keep their end of the covenant, God let the surrounding tribes harass, invade, and defeat them.

When their suffering was great and they cried out to God, God would have mercy and raise up a new judge who would save them from their predicament.

But after a while the corruption would return – a repeated refrain from Judges is “everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” And the cycle would repeat in an ever downward spiral.

Some of the most horrific stories in the Bible are in the account of the Judges. The book ends with this - In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

The book of First Samuel marks the end of the period of the judges. Samuel is the bridge between the the judges and the kings.

The monarchy will begin with Samuel's anointing of Saul, and after Saul's failure, David. That's next week's story. So Samuel will end up being Israel's last judge.

I want to begin Samuel's story with his mother, Hannah. Hannah joins a long list of biblical women who were barren. Hannah went to the tabernacle to ask God to intervene for her...to give her children.

Eli saw her praying silently, and after being convinced she wasn't just drunk, told her God would answer her prayer. She promised God that if she had a son, he would be dedicated to God and serve in the tabernacle.

Samuel was born, and she kept her vow – after he was weaned, he began living and serving with Eli in the tabernacle.

I want to read parts of what we call Hannah's song which she sang when she gave birth to Samuel. Listen very carefully and see if it reminds you of anything:

"My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.^[a]
My mouth derides my enemies
because I rejoice in your victory.

"The bows of the warriors are broken,
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

⁵Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
but those who were hungry are hungry no more.

⁷The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low; he also exalts.

⁸He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.

Does that remind anyone of anything?

Roughly 1000 years later, another unexpectedly pregnant woman name Mary will sing her own song...a song to the God who brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly. A song that reveals the very character of God and God's reign.

Hannah's song and Mary's song act as sort of bookends – Hannah's song comes just before the birth of the monarchy. And Mary's song sings of the one who will be the last king and who will reign forever and ever.

Both songs sing of the sort of reign God envisions. Both serve as a sharp contrast to how the the judges and the kings and the priests mostly were.

It is probably no wonder the word of God was rare at this time. The chaos and turmoil of failed leadership likely drowned out any word that might have come.

Eli is the chief priest and is faithful enough. But his sons...the next generation's leaders...are completely corrupt and abusive. And Eli didn't stop them. Samuel is given the unpleasant task of telling Eli that his family's place in the tabernacle is coming to an end. Samuel obeyed.

The boy whose mother sang of a God who lifts up the lowly and brings down the arrogant and mighty speaks prophetic words that tell how God will do that.

Eli will live into old age, but his sons will not. And they will not take Eli's place in the Tabernacle. Samuel's first prophecy does come true. From then on, God's word is no longer rare and Samuel grows into a well-trusted prophet.

So I'm wondering, what word of God is struggling to be heard today? Is God's word rare now? Or are we too anxious or angry or busy or worried to hear God? What are the voices – outside and inside our head – that oppose God? And to what is God calling you?

Bitter division stalks our society and the church. It seems like a clear word from God would settle everything.

But here's one of the problems with God's word that shows up right here in the story. God's word may not be something we want to hear. It may go against what we were so sure of. So the first thing to get rid of if we want to hear God is our own arrogance and certitude.

The story also tells us that spiritual mentors are vital. We need someone we can trust to bounce things off of...someone who can tell us yes I think you are hearing God, or tell us, no you definitely are not.

Someone you actually know. Because the internet is full of people who are happy to tell you all sorts of things.

If we're going to hear God's word, we've also got to have times of silence and listening...we need to practice being in the stillness and silence to hear God.

We need to know God's word in scripture well enough to know when something we think is from God is just our own self-centered desire.

But here's the most important thing about God's word. In John's gospel, we are introduced to the Word, not just as words on the page or even spoken words. We are introduced to the Word made flesh. Jesus is the word who was with God in the beginning and through whom all things were made.

The Word of God is first and foremost Jesus Christ. And the gospel word is first and foremost the good news that in Christ, the kingdom of God has come to earth and is even now unfolding. Because Christ defeated evil on the cross, we are assured that that kingdom will one day be present in full.

And that kingdom will look like what Jesus taught. If we want to know what words are being spoken today that oppose God, they are all the words that don't envision the world Jesus did. They are the words that do not lead to more love, mercy, and justice.

You are being called by God, just as Samuel was. You were called in your baptism to live as Christ taught. You are called to speak God's word of love, mercy, and justice into a world that is full of bitterness and hate. Moreover, you are called to live that.

Because the good news is not only that the kingdom of God has come...but that you are called to be a part of it...to be a part of the unfolding.

In whatever you do in your everyday life – whether it's farming, parenting, health care, construction, child care, home-making, teaching, or just simply being a friend or neighbor or grandparent – you are called to do that in a way that shows forth God's reign. You are called to show the world Jesus.

It may not be comfortable. You may have to show love to someone you don't want to. You may need to speak a truth that scares you. You may need to let long held convictions go.

But nonetheless, God, just as with Samuel, will be persistent. God will keep calling you, by the Spirit within you, to be the physical presence of Jesus in the world.

It's a big job. But God trusts us all to answer that call...God calls us to trust that when we don't get it right, God's mercy is there for us. And above all, God promises to walk with us all the way.