

**Second Sunday After Epiphany**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**17 January 2021**

**1 Samuel 3:1-10**

I like the story of the young woman who wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst. To her surprise, she received this letter from the college: "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower," (SermonIllustrations.com.) I believe that before we can be great leaders, we must be good followers. The emphasis here is on the word, "good." A good follower has great responsibilities to discern properly whom he or she follows and why. In other words, the follower knows the qualities of the leader he follows, the soundness of the message, the societal benefit of the cause, and the ultimate purpose for which the cause exists.

The reading from Samuel gives us an example of this. It is a call to all of us. The well-known reading speaks about the calling of the young boy Samuel, as he was asleep in the house of the Lord. Without an understanding of the context of the story one is left puzzled. Why would God use a very small child as the recipient of this prophecy? Why was the Word of the Lord "rare in those days"? Why is the Lord announcing to Samuel the destruction of the priestly line of Eli? The questions are many and by the end of the passage, the reading leaves us wondering: Whom will Samuel follow: Eli and his household or God himself? To understand the story, we need to look at an interesting cast of characters to which Samuel introduces us in the first 2 chapters of his book.

The first character is Hannah. When confronted with her inability to have children, which was considered a curse from the Lord in her day, Hannah turns to the Lord in fervent prayer at the temple. She is depressed, her husband's other wife is openly ridiculing her, and she feels ashamed and despondent. She is not eating, she is constantly sad, and like Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel in Genesis, she wants nothing more than for the Lord to remove the curse of barrenness from her and to bless her with a child. She pours out her soul in the temple, her lips are moving even though no sound is coming, she is gently rocking back and forth, as if praying with her entire body, mind, and soul. If only God could remove the curse, she would offer the boy to become a Nazirite (Someone dedicated to the service of the house of the Lord, who would be prohibited from cutting his hair or beard, drinking alcohol, eating grapes, or approaching a dead body [Oxford Access Bible, 335.]

The second character is the old priest Eli. He is the descendant of the priestly class of Levi, an entire tribe chosen by the Lord at the time of Moses to be dedicated to the service of the Lord's temple. He is the High Priest, the President of the Sanhedrin, and the Chief Judge of Israel. He is a great man with the awesome responsibility of overseeing the spiritual and civil life of the nation. As High Priest, his role was to enforce the liturgical- sacrificial life of the temple in accordance with the Law of Moses. He is charged with watchfulness and vigilance. His life as a High Priest should be without reproach, as to not cause anyone in the nation to lose faith in God or to desecrate (abhor) the sacrifices offered at the temple. His job as president of the Sanhedrin and as Judge for the nation was to impart and treat everyone with justice, ensuring that peace and prosperity were available to all, that the nation was properly defended from invaders, foreign and domestic, and that law and order were protected and upheld. It was his job to be the spiritual compass for the nation.

Eli is a great man, but he has a problem with which many of us are familiar. He has become so accustomed with his job, and so enamored with his own power, that he has lost zeal for the house of the Lord. His job has become routine, secularized, and filled with empty ritualism. He has lost the ability to discern the sacred from the secular and he thinks that Hannah is drunk when she is praying “without sound” at the temple. Ironically, Eli has two sons who are also Priests and Judges. Holy Scripture describes them as “Scoundrels, who had no regard for the Lord” (1 judges 2:12;) they had no regard for “the duties that as priests they had to the people” (v.13;) they violated the sacrificial laws by taking the choice meat from the sacrifice before the ritual boiling or burning of fat and did this by force when necessary (v. 13b-17;) they “treated the offerings to the Lord with contempt” (v. 2:17); they “lay with the women who served at the entrance of the tent of meeting” (v. 2:22;); and they “did not listen to the voice of their father” (v. 2:25a). Ironically, Eli judges Hannah for appearing to be drunk when she was just praying, while ignoring and even silently condoning the grave sins of his own two sons and his followers. They, who were responsible for protecting the nation, for leading the Israelites into greater justice, love, and faith, and for teaching the Word of the Lord, had failed to discharge their duties, and as a result, “the Word of the Lord was rare in those days,” as our reading tells us.

The third character in our story is the boy Samuel. The reading tells us that the boy did not yet know the Lord, and the Word of the Lord had not yet come to him. At some point during the night the Lord calls the young boy three times and reveals to him the judgment to the house of Eli. “I am about to do great things in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears tingle.” In his great wisdom, the Lord will use the ministry of a young, powerless boy, to prophesy the end of the priestly ministry of Eli’s family. We know that this prophesy was fulfilled when Saul, the first king of Israel, killed the entire priestly family of Eli, apart from Abiathar, one of the grandsons (1 Samuel 22:11-23.) We also know that King David instituted a new priestly line with Zadok, the Priest.

Samuel himself grew to become one of the most important prophets, priests, and Judges of Israel. God once again used the weak, meek, and humble to confuse and bring judgment on the powerful and the proud. The lesson here for us is very clear. We live in a world where the “Word of the Lord” has been expelled from our public places and weaponized in the private circles of many extreme Christian groups. And while we have the dual realities of an advancing secular society and a more radicalized Christian right, many of us, like Eli’s sons, continue to fail to proclaim and make known the saving, accepting, grace-filled “Word of the Lord.” Many of us take our spiritual life for granted and become overly ritualized and comfortable with our own routines, and like Eli, loose our zeal for the house of the Lord and for his holy name. Many of us become so concerned with the mechanics of church that we forget that we are here to worship the Lord in his Holy Temple and to ask for the strength we need to continue strong in our journey of faith. Many of us also allow the culture, radicalized groups, our jobs, and the busy-ness of life to drive God away from the center of our lives and become so secularized in our ways that we too fail to recognize the sacred, hiding in the mundane.

We are surrounded by holiness, but all we see is the darkness others want us to see. We started out following the voice of God, and many of us are now following human figures who claim to speak for the voice of God, but who are leading us astray. At one extreme, we have Secularism trying to convince us that God does not exist, and if he does, we need to reduce him to a very private, subjective, personal experience and leave the rest of our lives to the culture to direct at will. At the other extreme, we have radicalized groups that have weaponized the Gospel by trying to convince us that certain human leaders are God’s messengers, and we must follow them blindly, regardless of consequence. They speak of a persecution to come against all Christians, and they try to convince us that unless we pledge our undying allegiance to man, God will want nothing to do with us. We must arm ourselves and be ready to

defend the Gospel in that hour of persecution, even with violence if necessary. In the meantime, we who know only Christ deserves to be followed and that no human figure speaks with complete authority for God, remain silent, passive, and afraid. We who see the hate-filled attempts of both extremes to manipulate us and use us for financial and political gain, do nothing, while our country becomes more polarized and more divided.

My brothers and sisters, although our salvation is a gift of God, it was only through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross that this gift comes to us. We often forget that religion requires sacrifice and commitment. It is not passive engagement. We must commit to advancing and creating the world we seek, hope for, and pray for. We are here to praise God in gratitude for the great sacrifice of his Son on the cross, but we are also here to recharge our batteries, so that we may go out there and preach a Gospel of radical invitation, a Gospel of peace and hospitality, a Gospel that welcomes the brokenhearted and marginalized, a Gospel that actively works for peace and reconciliation. We need to preach this gospel of love, especially this coming week when many Americans will be led by their leaders into thinking Jesus demands they engage in insurrection. I do not know what God you follow, but if you believe you need to engage in violent revolution, it is not the God of Jesus you are following. You may be following the sons of Eli. You are following human figures who have no power to save. Jesus does not want you to kill your brothers and sisters for the sake of a utopian world that only exists in your mind and your leaders' minds. My friends, we are surrounded by the sacred. Do not let the extremists convince us that we are surrounded by enemies. God's creation continues to evolve in great beauty and majestic splendor. The sacred is all around us. Focus your eyes and your mind on God's beautiful creation and do not let the hate mongers convince us we are surrounded by darkness. Do not let the purveyors of racism and division convince you that violence is the way. Violence is never the way. The way of Jesus is the only way, and his way is the way of love.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, we give you thanks that you call every one of us into a ministry of peace and reconciliation. Help us to recognize that your son is the only leader worth following. Let us worship you in heart, body, and soul. And help us to work to advance your love for humanity in everything we do. We ask you this in Jesus' name. Amen!