

1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20)

Today's passage from the Hebrew Scriptures begins a couple of months where we read selected highlights from the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. This covers a period of transition from leaders known as Judges, when Israel was a loosely connected network of tribes to rule by monarchy. Most likely written in exile but refers to period of around 1,000BCE

One of the burning questions being addressed was, "Why did we go into exile"? Stopped listening to God, asked for king, God warned us but we did not listen.

As is the case, history being written in hindsight to explain what has happened in the life of the nation, give history meaning, purpose. We all do it, we retell our stories until we find the version that makes sense to us, and that becomes the definitive account.

Today's passage is evocative writing - literal, historical but also symbolic level

The word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread. Would be interesting to ask the Lord, did you really not have anything much to say in those days, or was it that people did not know how to listen or attend to visions?

Even Eli the old priest had eyesight that have begun to grow dim so that he could not see... are we meant to be hearing this as a comment not just on Eli's yes but his moral compass or powers of discernment. Even young Samuel did not know the lord

But all is not lost for the Lord is never without witness and so the, "lamp of the Lord had not gone out".

And we have the boy Samuel, living in the temple with the much older priest Eli. Now that would raise eyebrows today wouldn't it? How did he get there? Samuel's mother, Hannah, had for years been "without child". Hannah begs God for a child and during her prayer encounters the priest, Eli, who is less than comforting, accusing the praying woman of being drunk! Maybe those dim eyes! Despite this initial encounter, Eli tells Hannah that her prayer will be answered. Hannah has her long-awaited child, does as she promised, and gives the child to the Lord; (also problematic in today's values!) so the boy, Samuel, remains with Eli at the holy place in Shiloh.

It is on the surface a sweet lovely story much loved by SS teachers who use it to show how God can speak to a child of any age and situation and they too may well hear a call by God if they only attend. I recall teaching the story and getting kids to act it out in class. I think from memory we had to make up extra

cast members like temple cleaners, night staff keeping the candles alight etc cos there are only two characters in the story.

All that is true enough but there is a darker side to the story which is really where the prophetic message of the story is to be found. Eli is the case of a good man struggling with his responsibilities and calling. On a number of occasions you have to wonder if he is out of his depth. His day was a period of political anarchy in Israel's history when "every person did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6 = 21:25) It is not just the nation that has descended into spiritual and moral anarchy. It is closer to home. Eli has two sons Hophni and Phinehas, who are described as "wicked men; they had no regard for the Lord" (1 Samuel 2:12). Delving deeper we come to the brutal and dreadful realisation that sexual abuse and exploitation did not begin with Harvey Weinstein or Catholic priests... no it was alive and kicking back in the temple of Israel in 1030 BC when these two took advantage of their trusted position for their own sexual gratification.

Hardly surprising then that the word of the Lord was rare and there were very few visions. You feel the word of the Lord is rare these days? Visions are scant? People were not listening. God was not speaking

It seems as if the problem that the word of the Lord is "rare," perhaps because silence is so rare in our society. We hate a vacuum, have to fill every space with 24/7 noise, images, texts, the latest distraction. How would you possibly hear a word of God in amongst all that. Cos listening to God is an art, a skill that can be developed. One that is acquired through years of practise and diligent, often silent attention. . It's hard to untangle so much of the noise that our culture makes from God's Word of Life. And the other challenge is not just the clutter but also sometimes the content. So many people claim to speak for God that we need some kind of good theological filter to help us listen for God's Word. How would you possibly even know if God was speaking in today's world? Where would you go to listen? How would you listen? Who would you listen with? Easier to understand the Christian tradition of monasteries when you put it like that isn't it. One of the most interesting trends in Western Christianity is the recent emergence of some modern communities comprising largely of younger people that are attempting to keep alive the monastic spiritual practices as they may appear and be relevant to modern living.

So Samuel the young boy of all people in the nation hears the word of the Lord. And so we get on a roll that is played out in coming weeks of the small, insignificant taking on a crucial role in the life of the nation. For instance this boy as a grown man becomes literally the kingmaker when he anoints the new king. And that new king? No other than a small boy who is so unlikely a candidate for king his parents did not even bother to have him at home for the line-up of potential kings. A young lad by the name of David who becomes the greatest king in the life of the nation. That's the way it so often work out with God and this word of the Lord stuff.

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A final takeaway. That is the ease with which we may miss God's call or attribute it to someone else. Most people who speak of their call (not just talking about call to ordained ministry here) do not describe a major disruption in their lives. There are few Damascus Road experiences. Instead, they speak of a quiet, slow awakening to something, be that a life of a particular office in the church, an injustice that needs to be addressed, or a task that needs attention. Like Samuel, they often tell of a period of uncertainty about exactly what and why God is calling them. In addition, Samuel needed Eli to help him understand his call. It often takes others in our lives to aid us in understanding the call that God places before us. Part of our community of faith is to aid each other to see and live out our individual callings from God.