

Do you hear what I hear?

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Mark Schloneger

January 17, 2021

1 Samuel, chapter 3, verses 1-10.

*Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli.
The word of the Lord was rare in those days;
visions were not widespread.*

*At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim
so that he could not see, was lying down in his room;
the lamp of God had not yet gone out,
and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord,
where the ark of God was.*

*Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!"
and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli,
and said, "Here I am, for you called me."
But [Eli] said, "I did not call; lie down again."
So he went and lay down.*

*The Lord called again, "Samuel!"
Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said,
"Here I am, for you called me."
But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again."
Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord,
and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.*

*The Lord called Samuel again, a third time.
And he got up and went to Eli,
and said, "Here I am, for you called me."
Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy.
Therefore, Eli said to Samuel,
"Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say,
'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"
So Samuel went and lay down in his place.*

*Now the Lord came and stood there,
calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!"
And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."
(1 Samuel 3:1-10, NRSV)*

You know, stopping here, stopping at verses 10,
we're pretty sure that we know the three golden nuggets of truth
to take away from it.

This is a story about how God speaks to us

and how we often fail to recognize it.
This is a story that reminds us that we need to discern God's voice
so that we do not mistake it for the voices of human authorities.
This is a story of faith formation, how an old mentor helps his young protege
recognize God's voice and teaches him how to respond.
Stopping at verse 10, we've got this story all wrapped up with a bow on top.
Yes, this story can teach us all of these things.

But here's the thing: If we stop at verse 10,
this story of Eli and Samuel becomes pretty easy to swallow.
If we stop at verse 10,
well, there are still things that we can learn, for sure
but if we never read the next ten verses
we've manipulated this story into one
that is pretty gentle, pretty tame, pretty . . . nice,
it becomes an encouraging story rather than a challenging one.
one that can easily fit within whatever we're already doing.

But the truth is, at least as far as I can tell,
Yahweh is furious in this story,
Look how it begins:
The word of the Lord was rare in those days;
visions were not widespread.
And right away, we're given a clue as to why this is.

Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim,
so that he could not see
was lying down in his room.

The word of the Lord was rare,
visions were not widespread,
and Eli the high priest's eyesight was dim, and he could not see.
The writer of 1 Samuel wants us to know that these things are connected.
The ones whom God depended on to proclaim God's word, to mediate God's presence,
were preoccupied with satisfying themselves.

1 Samuel, chapter 2, says
"Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels;
they had no regard for the LORD
or for the duties of the priests to the people." (1 Samuel 2:12-13)
They stole the sacrifices that the people brought before God.
They threatened to beat up those who didn't give in.
They slept with the women who served at the tabernacle.
The position of priest gave them power,
and they exercised their power for their personal pleasure.
It's easier to have sympathy for Eli, but we have to remember,
he was the high priest,
he watched all this happen,

he grew fat from the meat that his sons stole from the people's sacrifices.
The people were suffering, while the priests were thriving.

God was looking for a servant for him and the people,
and when Samuel finally says, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,"
this is what happened.

1 Samuel, chapter 3, verses 11 to 20.

*Then the Lord said to Samuel,
"See, I am about to do something in Israel
that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.
On that day I will fulfill against Eli
all that I have spoken concerning his house,
from beginning to end.*

*For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever,
for the iniquity that he knew,
because his sons were blaspheming God,
and he did not restrain them.
Therefore, I swear to the house of Eli
that the iniquity of Eli's house
shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."*

*Samuel lay there until morning;
then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord.
Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli.
But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son."
He said, "Here I am."
Eli said, "What was it that he told you?
Do not hide it from me.
May God do so to you and more also,
if you hide anything from me
of all that he told you."*

*So Samuel told him everything
and hid nothing from him.
Then [Eli] said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."*

*As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him
and let none of his words fall to the ground.
And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba
knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.
(1 Samuel 3:11-20, NRSV)*

The message that God gave to Samuel must have weighed heavily on his heart.
When Eli asked him what God had said,
he faced the same choice that Eli faced with his sons.

Should I risk my relationship with a person who is close to me
or should I keep quiet?

The truth, it hurts sometimes.
It can hurt when you receive it.
It can hurt when you have to tell it.
It can be lump-in-the-throat, pit-in-the-stomach, ache-in-your-bones, excruciatingly painful,
both to yourself and those you love.

We like to protect ourselves and the ones we love
by avoiding it, manipulating it, molding it, or ignoring it,
but sometimes, if we want to be whole,
if we want others to be whole,
we have to face it, we have to tell the truth.

The truth is, I can't continue in this relationship.
The truth is, I haven't been telling you the truth.
You've hurt me deeply.
What you're doing is wrong, and I'm here to confront you.
I'm sorry.
It was me.
I've decided to resign.
If you continue on, in this way, I will work against you.
What you just said, it's racist.
America may go to hell.

That last one is a bit shocking, isn't it?
Some might say that it's wrong to even say something like that in a sermon.
But on the morning of Thursday, April 4, 1968,
the same day that he was assassinated,
Martin Luther King, Jr., phoned his home church,
Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta,
and gave those words as the *title*
for the sermon that he planned to preach on the upcoming Sunday.

We've domesticated King and his prophetic witness
so we are shielded us from the truth that he felt burdened to bear.
Today, ninety-four percent of Americans
have a positive impression of Martin Luther King, Jr.
The Monday after his birthday, January 15, is a national holiday,
which we'll observe tomorrow.
Even in these polarized times,
Americans from across the political spectrum
invoke King's name to justify their beliefs and actions.
His name adorns schools and street signs, and even more.
I'd like to show you a commercial
that aired during the Super Bowl a couple years ago.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtIVU5YDDvc¹](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtIVU5YDDvc)

You know, when I watched that for the first time, I'll admit, I felt stirred.
King's words and way of delivering them are awe-inspiring,
and his words in this commercial about service
fit so, so well, with our scripture focus this morning.
Because Eli, his sons, and the priests had utterly failed to serve God,
God called on a young boy who was willing to do what they would not.
That's what God wants – people who are willing to faithfully serve,
both in their words and actions.

But think more deeply about what you just saw.
King's name, his words, his sermon, were used, manipulated, molded and enfolded
in an advertisement for Ram Trucks.

The clip that was used in that commercial
comes from King's sermon, "The Drum Major Instinct,"
a sermon where he talks about people's desire
to be out front, to be first, ahead of others, to serve themselves.
And one of the specific evils that King condemned in that sermon
was the exploitation of this selfish drum major instinct
by advertisers and, in particular, those of auto manufacturers.

A month before his death,
a poll found that King had a disapproval rating of seventy-five percent.
Undoubtedly, one of the reasons for such wide disapproval
was his willingness to speak truth to those whose hands fed him.
He felt compelled to speak out about things that alienated his liberal supporters.

He spoke out against the war in Vietnam,
He called America "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world."
He critiqued a capitalist system that was designed to keep poor people poor.

In an article reflecting on the fiftieth year after King's assassination,
Cornel West wrote: "We should be highly suspicious of those who sing his praises
yet refuse to pay the cost of embodying King's strong indictment
of the US empire, capitalism and racism in their own lives."²

King wasn't a prophet preaching can't-we-all-just-get-along unity
with those invested in the politics and economics of oppression.
To reduce him to that message is like stopping
at the first ten verses of 1 Samuel chapter 3.

Over the past weeks,
there have been many articles written about the failure of evangelicals
and how their behavior and actions helped to fuel the insurrection.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtIVU5YDDvc>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/04/martin-luther-king-cornel-west-legacy>

I think it's easy for us Anabaptists to read these articles from a critical distance,
to shake our head in dismay at people's willingness, churches' willingness,
to trade their prophetic witness', for political power --
to trade their birthright as children of God for a bowl of porridge.

Yet, we have to ask ourselves, are we listening for God's voice?
Are we willing to hear and to speak hard truths?
How will I remain faithful to Jesus when my urge
is to seek the approval of those who already agree with me?

In those days, the word of the Lord was rare,
visions were not widespread,
and the one who was called to serve God and the people
had poor eyesight -- he could not see.
But the lamp of God had not yet gone out.

Philip found Nathanael and said to him,
"We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote,
Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."
Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"
Philip said to him, "Come and see."
When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him,
he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"
Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?"

Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."
Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God!
You are the King of Israel!"
Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you
that I saw you under the fig tree?
You will see greater things than these."
Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and
descending upon the Son of Man." (John 1:45-51)

Come and see.