

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Salt Lake City, Utah

January 18, 2009 – Second Sunday after Epiphany

I Samuel 3:1-10

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. 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 answered, "Here I am." And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down. Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

John 1:49-50

Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that."

When we hear of someone who claims to hear the voice of God speaking audibly to them and directing their actions, we generally think that person needs to be in an in-patient psychiatric facility. That very scenario, however, is the story in today's reading from the Hebrew scripture. It is a description of a divine encounter when Samuel heard the voice of God.

The writer of this incident puts the story of Samuel and Eli in context by telling us, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days.” Or, as another translation puts it, “The word of the Lord was not as vivid as it once had been.” In other words, it was a time when the preaching was pretty rotten, when religion seemed to be slipping from people’s consciousness, and when used car salesmen were deemed more trustworthy than ministers. It was that sort of time.

The story opens with old Eli. He had been the head priest at Shiloh for a number of years. His entire life had revolved around the word of the Lord. Eli had studied the holy writings, had listened for God’s directions, and had served as the mediator between the people and their God. He had been called by God to help the people stay in communication with the divine.

Over the years, Eli had heard a number of people pray at Shiloh. One of these was Hannah who prayed earnestly and fervently for a child. As Eli heard her pleas, he gave her a message from God that promised a son for her.

That brings us to the second character in the story, Samuel. He was the child promised by God to Hannah. When Samuel was born, she promised him to God’s service. When the boy was old enough to leave home, she brought him to Shiloh, to Eli, to God, and left him there.

We are not really certain what Samuel’s role at the temple were. He was not ordained as a priest. After all, he was still a child. More than likely, he served as a helper for Eli, who had gotten old. Thus, Samuel was accustomed to listen for and to respond to Eli’s voice.

So, we have Eli, the priest, always hoping to hear God’s voice again. And, we have Samuel probably hoping to be allowed to sleep through the night with no thought of ever hearing God’s voice.

And then, something strange happened as the third character of our story, God, appeared. When the word of the Lord is finally heard again in the land, it does not come to Eli the professional religious person who had been study-

ing the scriptures for his entire life. Instead, the word of the Lord comes to young Samuel, who had been expecting to hear nothing more than the voice of old Eli.

That raises a question. Why would God bypass Eli, the experienced priest, and speak only to the young boy? We don't know the answer to this with any certainty. Elsewhere in the book of Samuel, we are told that Eli was not only old, he was fat. Now, I am not suggesting that God will ignore older, overweight individuals. At least, since I am getting older and heavier, I hope that is not the case. One other thing we are told about Eli is God's dismay by the lack of respect Eli's sons showed toward the people who came to worship at Shiloh and toward their responsibilities as priestly leaders. Perhaps that is the reason God did not speak to Eli.

Whatever the reason, we, the readers of this passage, are witnessing a power shift. The torch is being passed. Samuel is now favored and not Eli. One is being raised up, and one is on the decline.

That raises another question. With whom do you identify in the story? Do you see yourself as Samuel or as Eli? Perhaps your choice of roles has changed through the years. It is common for the children who read this to see themselves as Samuel. I could make that identification once. Now, though, I actually identify with and understand Eli much more clearly.

You see, I am now part of the establishment. I am part of the group who looks at new ideas with suspicion. I am part of the group who is not always certain that the preacher has anything worth-while to say. I serve as the priest at the temple.

This kind of thing can happen to churches as well. Corporately speaking, of course, churches can get comfortable with the way things are. Churches can assume that things must always be done in one and only one way, and it does not take long for any activity to attain the status of a time-honored tradition.

Let me give you a personal example. I was the pastor of a small church in

Kentucky during my doctoral work. I started at the church in the fall and suggested to the people that we try some things at Halloween and at Thanksgiving. The ideas were well-received, even though the church had never done anything like that before. The following year, as we talked about our fall plans, I suggested making some changes to what we had done the previous year. You would have thought I had just committed heresy. One of the church leaders spoke up, “But we have always done it the other way.” Now, I knew perfectly well that the activities had only happened once, since I was the one who had suggested them. Now, though, these activities had reached the status of tradition. Woe to me, or to any other minister, who suggested that it be changed.

This incident with Eli and Samuel is not the only example of this dynamic of changes that will come as a result of a divine encounter that I could mention. The brief reading from John’s gospel shared in service today has Jesus referring to greater things and, by implication, different things than had happened before on the horizon for God’s people. Today, of course, is part of the weekend we celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday. Part of his message to the people was to be prepared for the new things God would do in our nation.

Looking back at the story of Samuel and Eli, we should realize that it can be applied to our church as well. We cannot change the reality that we will celebrate our 144th anniversary next Sunday. We can, however, be committed to staying open to the possibilities of new things God would be doing in our midst. We can look ahead with a new vision for being the people of God in this place. It might require turning loose of some traditions, but that could be fun.

Dear people of God, as we look at the story of Samuel and Eli, we can think of it as depressing. After all, the faithful Eli was pushed aside in favor of the younger Samuel. Or, we can see the story as an inspiring one, since it tells of a time when the word of God was heard in a new way with a new power and for new purposes. I prefer to think of it as an inspiring story of a divine encounter that changed things. As it happened in Samuel’s time, may it happen here. AMEN.