

“Reading the Story from a Different Perspective”

1 Samuel 3:1–20

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Stories can be read from different perspectives. We can view the action through the eyes of different characters in a story and, as readers, we can read the same story at different places of life and thus see different things. I have read and preached on today’s narrative from 1 Samuel 3 many times, including several times here, but I am starting to read this story from a different perspective.

I used to focus on Samuel. He is the younger character in the story. He is the newcomer to religious leadership. I have often focused on the vibrancy of his calling which comes to life in the hymn we have sung, “Here I Am, Lord” even though this hymn also reflects the calling of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:8). I love this hymn, and like many people, I find deep meaning in Samuel’s experience of calling.

But I am starting to see the wisdom of reading this story from a different perspective. I am starting to identify more with Eli, I don’t know why... I suppose I might be closer to his age... but this has been the case for some time, I just haven’t fully embraced this reality. I am not an age denier, but when a former colleague recently sent me a picture of me preaching a dramatic sermon twenty years ago, that guy looked quite different than the person I see in the mirror today...

But I also identify more with Eli now because I have a longer history with traditions of faith. I am more traditional, whether I acknowledge this or not — it’s a bit like age! I have come a long way from the long-haired teenager who asked provoking questions and saw all things as new, though I like to think that I haven’t lost my edge. Early in my ministry, a family friend told me he hoped I could hold on to my passion and courage but feared the church would take it out of me piece by piece. I hope I have held on to some enthusiasm and openness, even though I am now in my forty-second year of ministry, and at a ministers’ meeting this past Monday, I was the only one wearing a tie...

We are who we are, and we are the age we are. All of this is a part of life, all of this informs the way we read a story, and all of this is good because different perspectives open up different understandings of any story, including the one we have read from 1 Samuel 3. If we read this story from the perspective of Eli, what might we see that we could otherwise miss or at least give less attention?

One thing we see is a word of warning. Eli and his house had been promised God's favor forever (1 Samuel 2:30a), but now God will punish them forever. God's favor did come with the caveat, "for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be treated with contempt (1 Samuel 2:30b)." The primary problem is not with Eli but with his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who are called scoundrels and blasphemers because they take animals brought for ritual sacrifice and cook them for their enjoyment. But Eli does not take appropriate action to stop them. So, he is complicit with their transgressions.

It is a word of warning and not just for religious leaders but for the church as a whole. Whenever we betray God or the trust of the people we are called to serve, and Eli's sons do both, we may lose the privilege of being leaders or church for people.

I think of the network of pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention who protected a significant number of ministers who had harassed or assaulted women or children. Not only is the integrity of all involved called into question, the integrity of the churches involved and the entire SBC is. How can anyone trust faith communities and their leaders that tolerate abuse? On a less dramatic level, yet at same time, often devastating, I think of leaders and churches that do not guard confidential information appropriately. Who would stay in a setting where their personal story, shared in confidence, was passed along?

But there is a broader message here from Eli's experience about being stuck in the past and assuming that something that was full of meaning always will be. Eli was the leader, but he will not be now.

Claiming the best of our heritage is wise, and we have a rich heritage in this church, nearly 212 years of it, so many wonderful faithful people, and so many rituals and traditions that have deeper meaning because we have

celebrated them for so long — Hanging of the Greens, Toy Joy, the clothing ministry, the WMU, and the list goes on and on. But rituals and traditions have to be freshened-up to have meaning in each new generation, and some occasionally need to be discarded or replaced. For example, we are struggling with how often to have an offertory. It is a great teaching resource for children, but very little of our income comes in through the plates.

But not only do treasured rituals and traditions need refreshing, because they are human inventions, the wonderful people who have come before us and been faithful in many ways were also human. For example, some of our early pastors were slaveowners — like Amos J. Battle and Thomas E. Skinner. We may attribute this to the times, but we must not dismiss it. It was still wrong, and there were Christians who knew this at the time.

We are all a mixture of faithfulness and betrayal. We are all saints, in the biblical sense of being called out to a distinctive life, but we are salty saints, as someone has said.

When we read the story of Samuel’s calling through the experience of Eli, we see a word of warning. We are wise to guard against any presumption of favor or place and the tendency to get stuck in our ways. God can always find new hands and feet. Samuel doesn’t even know God when he is called to service, but he is called.

But there is another thing we see through Eli’s experience — a word of encouragement. In the story, even Eli knows there is a need for change. The word of the Lord has been rare. God is not speaking to him or he is not listening — we don’t know which. And he wants to hear from God. There is still a need for divine counsel and prophetic voice; Eli wants to hear it, even if it is bad news. Once he realizes God is speaking to Samuel and helps him to listen, Eli demands that Samuel tell him everything God has said, and thus he does.

So, the word of the Lord may be rare, but it is not nonexistent. God still communicates to God’s people in this and every time. Our 200th anniversary theme “God Calls Us Still” proclaimed this truth. It is a hopeful word, an encouraging word for the church. God is not done with us, no matter how discouraged we may be at times. God still speaks to us and has a purpose for us, no matter what the numbers say about church attendance in our culture

right now. As Carlyle Marney astutely observed, people are always talking about the church dying, but it never does. God's work will continue. In fact, the best days for the church may still be ahead. They just may not be what we would expect.

Tony Campolo once said that if people had seen what was happening in the basements of African-American churches in the 1950s, they would have realized what was coming during the 1960s in the Civil Rights Movement. Many in that time and some to this day would contend that this didn't have anything to do with Christian faith. But such a perspective does not hold up in light of the New Testament.

Jesus had zero patience with the denial of rights and dignity of any of God's children nor was he deterred by the costs of challenging authority. The movement Dr. King led with others like Fred Shuttlesworth, a peaceful movement seeking the just treatment of all, was an embodiment of the teachings of Jesus. The church is called to be disturbers of the status quo, not arch supporters of it, when it goes against God's calling. God was in the movement toward racial equality that is still ongoing to this day.

So, God is still speaking to and working through the church today. If there is a preview of coming attractions like Tony Campolo observed in the 1950s, what might it look like? I'll not try to answer that question exhaustively, but it has something to do with the kind of event we hosted yesterday, with getting into the community more, engaging people and concerns around us in a Christlike way. It has something to do with building bridges between people of different beliefs, ethnicities, identities, and political persuasions, because there can be no community until we do. It is about partnerships, not just what we do for ourselves. At the same time, the church cannot ignore its calling to address the deep human longing for the Holy, for community and God. Basic human hungers endure and we are called to address them.

In all of this, there is a word of encouragement that God is still at work among us, to go with a word of warning that comes from viewing the narrative of 1 Samuel 3 through the experience of Eli. One other thing this perspective gives us is a reminder that faith is worked out in community, and

more specifically, we need the insight of different generations to make the church all it can be.

Samuel may be the new kid in town or temple, but he can't tell the difference between God's voice speaking and a bird chirping in the woods, though the two could be one and the same... He needs Eli's guidance to receive his calling. Eli cannot carry the work forward, but he still has something important to contribute. He knows how God works, he helps Samuel do what he cannot alone.

Two generations are needed to make this story of calling work. Each character needs the other. So it goes in the church to this day. We need each other, we need community, and we need all generations contributing distinctive gifts, insights, and perspective. We need the very young and the more mature, and those of us in-between (I hope I still have some time in-between...). We need all of us to make a church.

The good news is we have all generations in this church as well as a history of doing things together and making sure we value the voice of every generation. Sometimes intergenerational experiences just happen, but intentional efforts help facilitate connections — church picnics, churchwide retreats, Lynn's buddy ministries linking children and older members, Toy Joy, Sunday School breakfasts. And some inclusion of voices happens spontaneously, but formal policies also help. We have no age limits or tenure of membership requirements for leadership roles.

We need experience and newness, wisdom and enthusiasm, and it's not that these all align with age. Tony Campolo once said we are only as old as our cynicism and as young as our dreams. But when all ages are involved, there is a greater chance of hearing all perspectives. The faith can't move forward without Samuel, but Samuel can't even get started without Eli's help. So it goes to this day.

The good news is — it goes... the church looks forward. There is a word of warning and a word of encouragement, but together we continue to move forward. As Samuel Wells notes in his book *A Future That's Bigger Than the Past*, God's people cannot be known for our nostalgia. We must be known for our hope. And in God's grace, we will be...