

Second Sunday After Epiphany
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA
14 January 2018

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 have to be great followers.

The reading from Samuel today is a call to all of us. The well-known reading from Samuel 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. To understand the rest of the story we need to look at an interesting cast of characters that Samuel introduces in the first 2 chapters.

The first character is Hannah, Samuel's mother. 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 Elknah'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 bareness 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, it is as if Hannah is 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 Judge for the nation. He is a great man with the awesome responsibility of overseeing the spiritual and civil life of the nation. As a 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, and that law and order were protected and upheld. It was his job to be the spiritual compass for the nation, as well as a judge.

Eli is a great man, but he has a problem that many of us are familiar with. He has become so accustomed with his job 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” (1 Judges 2:13); 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 (1 Judges 2: 13b-17); they “treated the offerings to the Lord with contempt” (1 Judges 2:17); they “lay with the women who served at the entrance of the tent of meeting” (1 Judges 2:22); and they “did not listen to the voice of their father” (1 Samuel 2:25a). So, 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. They, who were responsible for teaching the Word of the Lord, had failed to discharge their duty 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 with the exception of Abiathar, one of the grandsons (1 Samuel 22:11-23.) We also know that King David instituted a new priestly line with Zadok. 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.

In the Gospel of John we see this same phenomenon. Jesus calls Philip, who waists no time in spreading the news about Jesus to Nathanael. Jesus announces to Nathanael the same promise God makes to Samuel. God says, “I am about to do great things.” Jesus says, “You will see even greater things.” The call for Samuel in the Old Testament, to Nathanael in the New Testament, and to us today is the same. We are called to witness the great things God is doing in our midst. We are called to follow him wherever he might lead us. To be witnesses of his love and

compassion for his people. To be beacons of hope in a world that is becoming more secular and more isolated from God.

The lesson here for us is very clear. We live in a world where the “Word of the Lord” is rare in our public square. God is no longer allowed in many places in our society. Many of us, like Eli’s sons, have failed to proclaim and make known the “Word of the Lord”. Many of us also 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, our jobs, 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 discern God’s presence among us.

Today, God invites us to follow his son in a wonderful journey that will lead us to Jerusalem during Holy Week. Throughout this journey Christ will reveal great things to us about ourselves and about our mission in and for this world. Christ will invite us over and over to remain alert and watchful and to realize that his kingdom is already among us. He will remind us that we are surrounded by the sacred. And he will warn us not to take the sacred for granted and forget to be grateful for God’s daily blessings. As he told Samuel and Nathanael today, we will see great things if we join Jesus on this journey. Let us pray that the Lord will give us the right disposition and endurance to follow him on this journey. And let us pray that we may treat holy things in holy ways, that we may have a grateful heart, and that we may lead compassionate lives.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord,

We give you thanks that you call each and everyone of us into ministry and invite us every day to worship you in heart, body and soul. Help us to be mindful of the great sacrifice of your Son for our salvation and to always be grateful for his love and compassion toward us. In his holy name, Amen!