

October 15, 2017
I Samuel 3:1-21 John 3:8 "Here I Am!"

"Why do we continue to read, explore, and mine these ancient scriptures of ours? Why care about the lives of people living in times so very different from our own? Why engage in this work of imagining that our lives might in some way be connected to theirs-- that our lives too might be filled with divine purpose?"

Part of the answer, I think, has to do with the thread that William Stafford's poem so eloquently points to in his poem, *The Way It Is*. (1998) I've shared this poem with you before, but I share it again because it speaks so well to our earlier questions.

Stafford writes:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it's hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

The thread we hold onto in the reading of our scriptures is the spiritual lineage of our faith. As a Christian people, we are part of an ongoing story of relationship between God and God's people with roots sunk deep in the Hebrew Tradition. Each time we connect with that ancient story, we root ourselves more deeply in that soil of profound mystery that resides at the heart of life. It is that profound mystery which threads its way through our history as God's people, and continually moves us forward in faith.

The book of I Samuel begins in the house of a man remembered only here. Elkanah is married to two women. Hannah, his favourite, is barren. Hannah begs God for a child. Her heart cries out her misery and despair as she prays in the temple at Shiloh. Eli, the priest serving at the time, accuses her of being drunk. But when Hannah shares with Eli her deep yearning for a child, Eli offers to her his blessing. When Hannah conceives (as we knew she would) and gives birth to Samuel, she dedicates him to God, just as she has promised, and we know someone significant to the Biblical story has been born.

Hannah's dedication of her son to God is an ancient thread to the sacrament of baptism or blessing we offer our children today. Like Hannah, we too confirm God's blessing and call upon the lives of our children. We affirm, as Hannah does, that our children do not belong to us, rather are entrusted to us by God for a brief time.

Once Samuel is weaned, Hannah brings him to the Holy Place at Shiloh, and leaves him with Eli, to serve God in the temple. Eli becomes as a father to him, and Samuel is said to grow in stature and in favour with God and with men (sound familiar?). Meanwhile, Eli's own sons fall into depravity and bring dishonour to God, to the Temple, and to the House of Eli. In time, Samuel will supplant Eli's sons as the priest at Shiloh. The beginning of Samuel's leadership will mark the end of Eli's priestly lineage.

As we begin this morning's text, we read, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. 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."

A poignant beginning.

The boy, Samuel, is bedded down in the temple with the Ark of the Covenant while Eli sleeps in another room. The boy hears a voice calling, and three times arises, going to Eli saying, "Here I am; you called me." We know that it is God calling the boy, but at first neither Eli nor Samuel understands this. Finally, it dawns on Eli that it is God addressing Samuel, and he tells the boy to go back to bed and wait for God to speak again, and then to reply, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

As I ponder yet another story of God's calling, It strikes me how various are the people and the situations into which, God speaks. There is Abraham, in middle age, called to leave his home and his people and travel to an unknown land in the company of a hitherto unknown God. And Moses, called to deliver his people out of

Egypt, as he is in exile and quietly tending his sheep in the desert. I think of Mary, a young girl, called in the solitude of her room, to bear a son who will be called 'Emmanuel'. Jesus' disciples, James and John, are called as young men, from mending their father's fishing nets to follow Jesus—and Matthew, while sitting at his table collecting taxes, hears the words, "follow me." I never cease to be surprised at those who hear, recognize and choose to respond to what they perceive to be a call of God upon their lives.

Lately Michael and I have been watching an old (some might say 'cheesy') TV show called Highway to Heaven. Michael Landon plays the part of an angel named Jonathon, who travels in a beat up old Chevy with a rough-around-the-edges, slightly curmudgeonly sidekick named, Mark. In each show they receive an assignment from 'the Boss'-- part of which is to figure out who the assignment involves, what the nature of the 'job' is, and how they might be of assistance. The two of them might show up as handymen, butlers or schoolteachers, as environmentalists, sports writers, or priests. Always they are given a practical job to do, but the job isn't the assignment—the assignment is finding and helping people in pain--people struggling with some type of personal heartache or moral dilemma. The work is to assist in the work of inner transformation for those involved, as well as of outer resolution of their predicament. And, just to add to the goodness and fun, there is always an area of personal transformation involved for one or both of them as well.

I am reminded again that God uses all kinds of people in an endless variety of situations and ways to bring about the work of healing and transformation in our lives and in our world. The reality is that all of us experience brokenness and wounding in our lives. All of us carry scars on our souls. Thanks be to God, all of us have moments when we are blessed to be a healing presence in the lives of others. When we are at our best, we minister to one another not as those of have it all together, but as wounded healers, as those who understand what it is to experience difficulty and pain.

I would like to take a moment to consider Eli. Eli clearly doesn't always catch on right away, but when he does... when he realizes that Hannah is weeping out of grief rather than intoxication, when he realizes it is God calling Samuel, when he realizes that he will be the end of the priestly line for his family, he consistently says and does the right thing. He comforts and blesses Hannah and sends her on her way. He raises and mentors Samuel, teaching him to listen for God's voice, and insisting that Samuel truthfully reveal all that he has heard, even though he has been given difficult and painful words to speak to this man who has been as a father to him.

We make a mistake, I think, when we expect our mentors and leaders to always see with clarity, to consistently get things right the first time, to always know the correct word to speak, or the best course of action. We make a mistake when we define a person's leadership, or their life for that matter, by the worst that they have said or done, or by an area of blindness or weakness that has challenged the skill with which they lead or companion us. It can be our great loss when we dismiss people too soon...when we consider one another disposable.

Eli has blown it with his lack of discipline and authority in the oversight of his sons' contemptible behaviour in the temple. As a result, Eli's heart will be broken, as will his priestly lineage, but he will accept what he is given with humility and with grace. Eli will continue to trust, not in his own adequacy, but in that of his God. His reply to Samuel, is simple, "He is the Lord. Let him do what is good in his eyes."

We as church would do well to be like Eli, in encouraging one another and those we meet along the way to listen to the voice that calls them forth into all that they were created to be and do. We would do well to help each other tell the truth we have heard in the depths of our souls, even when it is a difficult word to speak. And, if like Eli, at the end of the day, we can receive whatever comes our way in a spirit of deep trust in the One who gives us life...we would do well indeed.

Walter Brueggemann: "On Reading the Sinai Pericope,"

Your voice disrupted and took our breath away.

You spoke—in your own voice.

You addressed us, willing to engage.

You said, "Thou" and we were connected to you.

You said, "Thou shalt" and we were summoned.

You said, "Thou shalt not" and we were under discipline.

You gave us your dream and your hope

And we answered with a simple yes.

