

LIGHT; 1 SAMUEL 3:1-20; JANUARY 18, 2009
ORDINATION/INSTALLATION OF OFFICERS
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Today's account from the first book of Samuel is a classic story of being called by God. I was not surprised to discover that Rembrandt painted this wonderful scene of the elderly high priest Eli and the young boy Samuel.

The story is bathed in the dim but rich light of the lamp of God, an oil lamp placed by the ark of covenant that burned each night until morning.

The story-teller masterfully sets the stage for what is to follow: "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, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!"

Today we ordain and install new elders and deacons. The lectionary selects conveniently for us today this story of call. The Gospel reading today is Jesus calling the disciples.

I would like to focus for a few minutes on Samuel's call from two perspectives. First, what does the story say to us as a simple biblical tale about being called; and second, what does the story tell us as a parable about light and leadership?

At one level the story is a simple tale: a young boy is roused three times in the night by a voice he mistakes for his master only to discover that the voice is that of God who is calling him to confront the old man with harsh words of condemnation. Apprehensive, Samuel finally shares his vision, and Eli surprises the boy and us by acknowledging that the word spoken by Samuel is true and submits himself to its judgment.

What's the moral of the story? God's call, which we often initially mistake, can come as a word of intrusion disturbing in content, disruptive of our lives; but if we trust the voice that calls us a way opens up and God uses us to do more than we thought possible.

Note: there is no period of breaking-in for Samuel. He is a boy. He will become a great leader of Israel. Yet, God calls him now to carry out a difficult task.

What else does the story say? One thing is clear: when God calls us it is often to do things that seem beyond our ability. Think Moses, a mere boy himself; or Amos, a simple gardener; or Jacob, ne'er do well and repro- bate; or Paul persecutor/bigot. Each confused at first by God's intrusion into their lives, then fearful, but finally transformed and trusting servants.

I don't mean to suggest you new leaders are criminals or bad people. Just the opposite. You have been chosen because of your wholesome living and trustworthiness.

But I think I can say for any who have been called by God that there is a common and overwhelming feeling of being inadequate to the task and anxious.

So if you find yourself questioning today, or wondering what the nominating committee was thinking when they called you, or what God is getting you into those are natural questions many have asked before you.

The second perspective today's story offers is as a parable about light and leadership.

I say I wasn't surprised that Rembrandt painted this ancient tale – it sounds like a Rembrandt painting – the dim eyesight of Eli a metaphor for the dim vision of the corrupt age he lived in; the lamp of God flickering in the darkness near the ark, near the boy whose eyes and soul are soon to be illumined by God's voice and vision. And finally, Eli himself exposed by the light of God's judgment.

This is a story about light and the absence of light which is darkness; it is a story about the consequences of dwelling in darkness like Eli but also, if we are open to God's holy intrusions, how God's word becomes a lamp to our feet.

What does the story say about leadership? We too live in an age when our leaders seem, like Eli, to have dim vision: leaders of government, leaders of industry, leaders of Wall St., leaders of education, health care and the church. We too live in a time of darkness.

But the lamp of God flickers by our side, just as it did for Samuel. Though the world be dark, God's word is a lamp to our feet. The ark where the lamp was kept was the ark of the covenant, the Torah, the word Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai, God's direction and mandate for individuals, families and nations.

Torah was the torch of God's people, like the torch held by the Statue of Liberty, illumining their way into a new and Promised Land; preceded in the wilderness, as Exodus says, by a pillar of fire and cloud.

Just as Samuel's time needed more enlightened leadership so does our time. And the word of Samuel, the bible says, from this day forth did not fall upon the ground.

Samuel lived in an age when a person's word was a concrete expression of their character. Like the person, a person's word is active or idle. Active words do what they say, achieve what the speaker says. Idle words are empty and meaningless.

God's word in the opening lines of Genesis is the supreme example. When God says let there be light there was light. When God said let there be a creation, creation came into being. The story-teller says Samuel, from this time on, was a person whose words accomplished what they said. Words that accomplish what they say – the mark of great leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. this weekend and we trust our new President-elect.

Let me expand on that: Samuel was a person whose words accomplished what they said because Samuel was a person who, from his boyhood to his dying day, strove to place himself before God and say, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

In other words, Samuel found his voice as he listened to and communicated the voice of God. That's all God is asking of our new leaders today, that's all God asks of any of us: to listen to God and tell what we hear in our own voices.

Sometimes I think we get hung up on trying to force the meaning of this story into a literal interpretation – as if we are supposed to hear God’s voice in the night. Some have, but most of us will hear God’s voice as an admonition to speak out or call for change or bring hope or work for justice even when the way to achieving those things is not yet clear. But we find our own voice when we use it to convey God’s justice and truth.

That’s not a bad description of a process our new elders and deacons have already embarked upon. Our deacons are undertaking a project as ambitious as our Westminster Economic Development Initiative, it’s called Parish Neighborhoods. You’ll be hearing more about it. Our elders have been holding special session meetings for the past two months to hear and learn about and address the historic deficit we are facing.

In both cases new and veteran officers have felt and may still be feeling they are being asked to do more than they can deliver: organizing a massive twenty-neighborhood system for congregational care and fellowship; or finding our way through an unprecedented and confusing thicket of no-win financial decisions.

Yet, attendance at meetings, the level of attention, clarity of thought and sensitivity of discernment has been as excellent as any I have witnessed in all my years of ministry. You see, our leaders, like Samuel the boy, are responding in our time of darkness by saying, “Speak Lord, your servants are listening.” No preconceived agendas, no lobbying for singular interests but a willingness to listen then lead by using their voices for what this congregation needs to do and be.

But we are only at the beginning of what I think will be a critical period of change, a time of learning to do things differently, of being willing to live with some discomfort and ambiguity—as we sort our way through the obstacles. At times the darkness will seem very near. But if we listen, like Samuel, for God’s word to us, its light will continue to equip us and transform us as God’s people.

God *does intrude* upon our lives, God *does take us to places* we do not want to go, God *seems to ask* for more than we can deliver – and if we find ourselves in that kind of discomfort, chances are, as Eli said when he heard Samuel speak, “it is of God.”

Today’s parable could be a mantra for our time: “We are not called to be the light. God is the light. We are called to carry the light into darkness.”

It’s precisely what Rembrandt did with his masterpieces; what Samuel did with his voice and leadership; what our elders and deacons and you and I are called to do for this church and our world.

Let us pray. Speak Lord for your servants are listening. As we face the darkness of our time the light of your word in Scripture and the blazing example of your people who have trusted you through the millennia shines in the darkness – sometimes like a flickering oil lamp, sometimes like a burning torch. Help us to turn to the light, to listen for your direction – even as it intrudes upon our comfort, or fear, or apathy and let us find our voice. Amen.