

## **Sermon: Are You Listening?**

1/17/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When Hannah entered the tabernacle that day, she was at her breaking point. For years, she and her husband had been trying to have a family, to have children. Now, if she were living today, she would probably go and see a fertility doctor, who would run tests and provide her with a number of different options. Back then, though, there was only one option available. Since her husband needed an heir, he married a second wife, who almost immediately became pregnant and began having children. With each passing child, the second wife mocked Hannah more and more mercilessly. Eventually, Hannah became so depressed and desperate that she went to the tabernacle in search of miracle. “If you give me just one child, a son, if you give me just that one thing” she fervently prayed to God, “I promise that I will dedicate my son to the Lord. He will spend his entire life as a Nazirite, as someone set apart for service to God.” As she left that day, Eli, the high priest, told Hannah to “Go in peace and may the God of Israel grant your petition.” Not long after she bore a son and named him “God has heard,” or as we know him, Samuel.

Hannah stayed true to her promise. Just after Samuel was weaned, she took him to the tabernacle and left him there, so that he might grow up under Eli’s care. In the ensuing years, we hear how Samuel grew in stature and in favor with the Lord. But all was not well within Israel. “The word of the Lord was rare in those days,” today’s Old Testament lesson begins. Once, visions had been widespread among God’s chosen people. Now they were far and few between, and pretty much everyone knew the reason why. Eli’s sons, priest themselves, had been taking advantage of their religious position. Not only were they forcing worshippers to give over part of their sacrificial offerings for their own gain; his sons were also having sexual relations with the

women serving at the tabernacle's entrance. His sons were, quite literally, desecrating the house of God and Eli was doing nothing about it. The high priest of Israel had become blind, both on account of his failing eyesight and his inability to call out the sin all around him, to hold his sons accountable. Surely, change was needed, change which God would soon call on Samuel to help bring about.

One night, so the story goes, Samuel was sleeping in the room of the tabernacle which housed the Ark. Now, the Ark of the Covenant, as every fan of Indiana Jones knows, is said to have been an ornate, gold-plated chest in which the Israelites placed the Ten Commandments. It was considered a source of immense power and a symbol of God's enduring and immediate presence. It was there, in the Holy of Holies next to the Ark, that Samuel was awakened by a voice. "Samuel! Samuel!" Immediately, he got up and ran to see if there was anything that Eli needed. My guess is that this was not the first time that Samuel had been summoned at night. "Here I am, Eli, why did you call? What do you need?" Understandably, Eli, just roused from his sleep, sends the boy away, probably with an air of frustration in his voice. "But I didn't call for you. Get out of here and go back to bed." As Samuel left and lay back down next to the Ark, I imagine he must have been confused. "But if it wasn't Eli, who was it? Did someone just play a trick on me? Or what if I only thought I heard a voice? Slowly Samuel closed his eyes and fell asleep once more.

"Samuel," the voice called out a second time. Again, we hear how Samuel got up and rushed to Eli's room, announcing "Here I am" before asking why he had been called. "My son," Eli bluntly responds, "I did not call you. Go back to bed, now." How could he have been mistaken again? Amidst all the confusion and questions that I imagine must have followed, we're told that Samuel did not even seriously consider that the voice might be God's. Why not,

you might ask? Because, the narrator admits, “Samuel did not yet know the Lord.” An interesting admission, don’t you think? I mean, Samuel was a priest, or at least a priest-in-training. He had spent years preparing for and engaging in ministry, and yet he did not know the Lord? If Samuel, someone whom the Lord favored, did not yet know God, then what hope do we have and what hope did Samuel have? Here’s where an important twist enters the story.

After hearing his name a third time, Samuel once more rushed to Eli. Except this time, Eli did not immediately send him away. Rather, he had what we might call an epiphany. “I wonder if Samuel is hearing God,” Eli said to himself. “Samuel, I want you to go back to bed and if you hear the voice again, say the following thing, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” Typically, our Gospel lesson ends one verse later, like it did today, with Samuel hearing his name and responding as Eli had told him. In this way, it serves as a testament to God’s call on his life, to his faith in a God that he does not yet know, and to Eli’s mentorship and recognition of God’s immediate presence. It also allows us to skip over the next ten verses. You see, while Samuel was listening to God that night, God gave him a message, one that he did not particularly want to hear. “Because Eli and his sons have desecrated my house,” God declared, “the priesthood will be stripped away from him and his household forever. This punishment will have devastating consequences for him and his family, and it doesn’t matter how many sacrifices or offerings they make. My judgment is final.”

Samuel lay awake in bed the rest of the night, afraid of the moment when Eli would call upon him, this time call him for real. “Samuel, my son,” he eventually heard from the other room. As Samuel passed through the doorway, Eli could tell that something was wrong. “What was it that God told you,” Eli asked him. “Whatever it is don’t hide it from me. If you do, God will do the same to you and more.” So Samuel told him everything. He told him that the time had

come for Eli and his sons to be held accountable for their sins. He told him the hard truth, the difficult truth, and how does Eli respond? Not by blaming Samuel, the messenger, or by pleading with God, as I imagine I would have done if I had been in Eli's position. Rather, he responded with pious humility, saying, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

This past week I've spent a lot of time thinking about the storming of the Capitol building. That day, five people died and countless others were put at risk because of hatred, racism, and lies. This is the hard, difficult truth we must accept. That hatred, racism, and lies exist within this country and the church, and they have for a long time. Among the people who stormed the Capital building that day were not just those carrying Confederate flags and symbols of white supremacy, but people shouldering crosses, waving "Jesus Saves" signs, and chanting "Christ is King." When we see and hear these things, when we seemingly have no response to the Proud Boys being referred to as "God's warriors," then we are being a lot like Eli. We are, in some small or large way, allowing and accepting their hatred, racism, and lies to continue. My guess is that Eli did not call out his sons for their sins because he knew that the truth can hurt. He knew that his sons would not humbly and piously accept his message, that there would be consequences for his actions. And because of that, because of his silence, he too was held accountable by God.

The hard, difficult truth is that hatred, racism, and lies exist within this country and the church. And I can't help but wonder: how many of us are honestly willing to accept this truth, as well as our role in letting it linger and sometimes even thrive? How many of us, when held accountable, will respond as Eli did, to "let God do what seems good to God"? This past week, I've tried to convince myself any number of times that I bear no responsibility. After all, I didn't storm the Capital building, I didn't hold any of those signs, and I didn't say any of those things.

Why should I be held accountable for their actions? In all honesty, I wish that I wasn't preaching this sermon right now. I wish that I could be preaching on the power and presence of God in Samuel's life and how God was working in Samuel's life, even before Samuel knew God, just like God is working in each of our lives. But the truth is that doing that would be me trying to look the other way.

The truth is that we all bear some responsibility for what happened at the Capital building just over a week ago, and if we remain silent and do nothing, the same will be true for whatever might happen in the coming days. We all have the opportunity, and indeed the obligation, to speak out against the hatred, racism, and lies that divide us. But, Pastor Jared, you might be thinking, I'm no prophet. I haven't been called to go out like Samuel and proclaim God's will to the world. What is God honestly expecting of me? At the very least, to remember the twist in today's story. Remember, it wasn't Samuel, the soon-to-be-prophet, who realized that it was God's voice that was speaking to him. Rather, it was Eli. We may not be called to be prophets, but by being open to God's presence in our lives and the lives of those around us, we can make a meaningful difference in this world. What if Eli had never told Samuel to respond, "Speak, for your servant is listening"? Perhaps, God would have found another way to call Samuel. Or, maybe Eli, imperfections and all, helped set Samuel on a path so much bigger than either of them could realize. In all likelihood, my words and actions will not bring about the end of today's hatred, racism, and lies, but they might just inspire the person or people who can. Let it be so, if not for me then for you. Amen.