

Second Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B

I Samuel 3:1-20

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

I Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

My week was going along *fine*—I was *chewing on the scriptures for today*, looking at them from different vantage points; *riding the hope and optimism* that had been expressed in the *Daytime Supper Group* (which is actually a *Midmorning Snack Group*); even *the political news saw signs of hope with the President calling on leaders of both parties to work together to resolve the status of immigrant children and youth brought here by their parents* (otherwise known as *Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals—DACA—the Dreamers*), and in fact, *bipartisan leaders from the Senate returned to the President with a joint proposal on Thursday*—my week was going along *fine...until news broke about vulgar comments the President reportedly made when those Senate leaders explained their proposal.*

Yes, the *President has denied that he said these things*, but the *vulgarity is consistent* with other comments that he *has made about immigrants*—he launched his campaign by asserting that *immigrants from Mexico were rapists.*

When I heard this *latest comment*, my insides were like that record that has the needle drug all the way across it. Something in me *broke*, something in me *unraveled*, and something *started to rise up within me*—our faith tradition might call it *righteous anger*—the *kind of anger* that makes **Jesus turn over the tables of the money changers in the temple**; that *anger* that comes when a *basic tenet of our faith is violated so blatantly*—that *anger* that **risers up** when the *basic dignity of a human being whom God created, whom God loves, a human being who bears the flesh that God filled with God's own presence* (*We just celebrated this theological truth of the Incarnation at Christmas, for goodness sakes!*), it's the *anger* that **comes** when **THAT divinely-infused human being's dignity is not respected**. So, I'm feeling some energy today.

So, this news broke *in the midst* of my reflections on these scriptures for today. I am so grateful for the *discipline and practice of preaching* that forces me to *immerse myself in the bigger story*, to *step into times removed from our own*, so that I can *gain some perspective on our world and our call in it*. You don't have to be a preacher to do this; in fact, it's good practice for any person of faith. Just go to [lectionarypage.net](http://lectionarypage.net) and click on the scriptures for the upcoming Sunday and sit with them through the week as the news rolls along.

And so, we turn to **I Samuel**—to the **old priest Eli and his priestly sons and the young boy Samuel**. And, we begin with this sad statement—**The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread**. People were feeling adrift; they were feeling God's absence; they were struggling to see the way forward and longing for some divine guidance. The **old priest Eli, his sight has grown dim**. He might have had some good vision at some point, but **he couldn't see clearly now**. Now, **the boy Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, right where the ark of God was**. **Samuel** just wanted to be close to the *Presence*.

Then the LORD called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and [Samuel] said, “Here I am!” and ran to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.”

But [Eli] said, “I did not call; lie down again.”

So [Samuel] went and lay down. The LORD called *again*, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.”

But [Eli] said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” Eli is a little slow on the uptake.

Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a *third* time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.”

*Then Eli perceived, he discerned, he understood, he got it; Eli’s sight may have grown dim, but his insight, that sight from within, his insight recognized that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.*

Now the LORD came and stood there, *calling as before*, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

And here’s what the LORD told Samuel: “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both *ears* of anyone who hears of it *tingle*. On that day I will fulfill *against Eli* all that I have spoken concerning *his house*, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish *his house* forever, for the *iniquity* that *he knew*, because *his sons* were *blaspheming* God, and *he did not restrain them*. Therefore I swear to *the house of Eli* that the *iniquity* of *Eli’s house* shall not be *expiated* by sacrifice or offering forever.”

Oh, that’s a mouthful. We’ve got to unpack this a little. God is *not* pleased; God is really *not* pleased, *not* with **Eli** and *not* with **Eli’s sons**.

And what exactly was it that **Eli’s sons** were doing? Well, when the Israelites came to make their **offerings to God**, it was the practice that the meat *first* be *boiled and then* burned, and after *the offering* was *entirely burned, then the roasted meat* was eaten in communal meals in which the *priests might participate*. **Eli’s sons** were *demanding* the meat be turned over to them when it was *still raw*, and if the person wouldn’t turn it over, *they took it by force*. They did this so they could roast the meat in a more *palatable* manner *for themselves*. Their *greed* denied the worshipers the chance to offer their best to God, and this bothered God immensely. That was **transgression number 1**. The **other transgression** was even more *egregious*. A report came to **Eli** that **his sons** were *having sex with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting*. #MeToo à la ancient Israel—this has been going on since the beginning of humankind. Powerful men having their way with women and women’s bodies. God was *not* pleased.

And **Eli, Eli knew** these things were going on. He **knew** about this **iniquity**, this **perversity**, this **twisting of the trust placed in those who serve at God's altar**, this **corruption of offerings**, this **treating of human beings as disposable objects to be forcibly taken and used for one's own pleasure**. **Eli knew** that what his sons were doing was **blasphemy**—**making light and treating with contempt offerings made to God**, **treating with contempt these precious women made in the image of God**—**Eli knew** what his sons were doing and **knew** it was wrong, and **he did nothing to restrain them**. *He tried to talk to them, but he did not hold them accountable; in some sense, he threw up his hands in frustration, and he looked the other way.*

**God is a forgiving God**, but *our actions matter*, and they *unleash impacts that can't be expiated*. **Expiated** is one of those weird church words, but the hebrew means "*purged, covered over by making a sacrifice or offering.*" In this instance, God is saying, "*There is no simple magic formula that covers over the damage done, like a fresh coat of paint, and makes it as if the transgression against me and another human being never happened. No, amendment of life and repairing these kinds of breaches—it's the work of a lifetime, not a one-time sacrifice or offering.*" This is about understanding abuse of power and setting about to completely rework power dynamics across the board.

*All of this was laid on the boy Samuel.* The curtain was pulled back and that **young boy** saw *truths and realities* he shouldn't have had to see at his tender age. **Samuel lost his innocence** that day. Well, **Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli.** How could he **look Eli** in the eye? How could he **tell Eli** what the LORD had spoken?

**But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son."**

**Samuel said, "Here I am."**

**Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me." May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.** Boy, you gotta admire **Eli's courage** at demanding that **Samuel** tell him *the truth!*

**So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."**

**As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.**

Oh, this is hard stuff. And the truth is *we are all of these characters*. We all have a **shadow side** that sees *other human beings as expendable*. The *cheap products I buy* are made on the backs of *those who work in sweatshops* across the world. And we are all capable of making *other human beings expendable* when we make them *the butt of our jokes*. We all have a **shadow side** that *grabs what is rightfully God's* for the *satisfaction of our own greed*—*our country makes up less than 5% of the world's population yet uses nearly 25% of the world's fossil fuel resources*. Well, *I drove my car here today* which makes me *complicit*, and we're now *opening up drilling in the*

*Arctic Wildlife Refuge* and considering doing so *off our coastlines*. We strip creation of her resources, lay claim to “what is ours,” and meanwhile, the *Children’s Health Insurance Program* is about to go unfunded—this is **iniquity**, this is *perversion* to use the words used in **I Samuel**. We all have a bit of **Eli’s sons** in us.

And we all have an **old priest Eli whose sight has grown dim** stumbling around *inside our souls*. That piece of us that *hears the story of a woman or an immigrant or a person of color recounted to us and challenges it or makes excuses for it or explains it away*; that part of us that *hears the joke or looks at the meme and doesn’t say a word*; that part of us *just lets things go* in the name of being “nice” and who so *doesn’t want to rock the boat*; that part of us that might even *risk a conversation*, but who *doesn’t have any idea*, truly, about *how to hold someone accountable* to the boundaries and limits and values **that God would have us live by**. We all know **Eli** all too well.

But **Eli and Eli’s sons** are not the only ones living within us; **Samuel** lives within us too. *Deep inside of us* there is a desire, a longing to be close to the Presence of the LORD. We have all had that experience of having *our innocence shattered* and being given a truth that *seems bigger than we are*. A truth that we *didn’t want to know*, but **now that we know it, we can’t unknow it**—we can only **speak that truth we’ve been given**, *cost us what it might*.

**God needs prophets**—you can’t be too young, or too old, or too this, or too that—**God chooses whom God chooses**. *Our task* is to **be obedient to the word of the LORD we are given to speak**. *I’m not to speak the word that God gives you; you’re not to speak the word God gives your neighbor*. We’re **only to speak the word God has given to us to speak**. It is *our job* to **listen for it, to receive it, and to risk the speaking of it**—to let none of the words God gives us **fall to the ground**. This is a *costly vocation*, but if it’s *grounded in God* and *obedient to the values God has placed within us* as *followers of Jesus*, people will *recognize* the **integrity** of our words and efforts, and will *know us* as *trustworthy prophets*.

And so, I *must* call out the President, and *anybody else*, **whenever their language strips another human being of their dignity**. I have to **speak the truth** that **racism is woven into the fabric** of these remarks—when you call *countries where brown and black people live* a vulgar name, and you call for *more immigrants from a European country made up mostly of people who are white like you*—that’s **racism**. **Racism**, whether *implicit* or *explicit*, is in **direct contradiction to our faith in Jesus—the One in whom there is no Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, no male and female**, but **IN WHOM ALL ARE ONE**. *I can’t be Eli and look the other way*.

*And for the salvation of my own soul, I also can’t destroy or diminish the dignity of the President’s humanity either*.

**Paul** addresses this today in that passage from **I Corinthians**. His language of **fornication** is graphic, but the **spiritual truth** is solid. We can’t *take things into our being* and pretend that *these don’t change us*. If we take in *cynicism*, and *snarky skepticism*, and *vulgarity*, and *adrenalin-laden rage*, it *hardens us*, and we *add our piece to the coarsening of our society*. And it’s a very short step from there to *seeing those we oppose as less than human*, and as we make *them less than human*, we **become less human ourselves**. **It’s a vicious cycle**. We must

remember that **the Holy Spirit lives within us**; we are **temples of God**; we *cannot afford* to *clutter our spirits and our souls* with *the politics of destruction* that has taken our country by storm.

As **the Lord is calling our name** and **giving us truths** we *don't want to hear* and, *even less, want to speak*, we've got to **muster our courage** to **speak these truths**, *messy though they are*, and *keep working* to *figure out* what *true accountability* looks like. ***This isn't a partisan issue***, this is a ***matter of our souls*** and ***human dignity*** and ***respecting the inherent holiness of all things***.

So, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, how is **God calling your name**? Even if you **miss it** the first few times through, can you **wait patiently**, and say, “**Here I am...Speak, for your servant is listening?**”

Can we **receive the word the Lord is giving us**, *no matter how hard and scary it is to hear*?

And can we **muster the courage to speak it**, *even when there's a risk that those listening don't want to hear it, even when it may cost us the relationship*? Can we *speak the word clearly, fiercely even*, but with *tremendous love and compassion at the same time*? I know this is *the work of spiritual giants*, but I think this is what *God is asking of us in this time*.

**God is in desperate need of some trustworthy prophets. God has a word to speak to you that God needs spoken into this world**, and if you **risk receiving these words**, **God won't let them fall to the ground**.

**So, do your work**—*confront* your *shadow*, *own* your *complicity*, and then *breathe deep of God's courage*—yes, *we are Eli's sons*, and yes, *we are Eli*, but *we are also Samuel*, **prophet of the LORD**.

Listen close, fellow **prophets of the LORD**—**God**, and **God's people far and near**, have *placed their trust in you*. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC  
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