

Second Sunday after Pentecost—PR4—Year B

I Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20)

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

II Corinthians 4:5-12

Mark 2:23-3:6

We've got some wonderful images dancing this morning, playing off against each other, drawing us to deeper places.

The **old priest Eli** and the **young boy Samuel**. The one whose **eyesight has grown dim**, who **doesn't hear well** at all, and the **eager ears** that are *hyperalert*, **hearing his name called out** in the middle of the night.

And when we jump over to the **gospel**, we have the **consummate rule-followers** and a **Lord who knows the necessity of bending the rules for the sake of the human being in need** who stands before you.

*And all of these images are important because there is a bit of all of these characters inside of each one of us.*

I love how that passage from **I Samuel** starts out—“**The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.**” It ups the ante and feels so very relevant to the times in which we live—a time when we *need to hear from God* and *have a hard time finding God's voice*; a time when we *need a bigger vision*, when we *need to see the world through God's eyes*, and yet, we *have a hard time seeing* at all.

**Eli's eyesight has begun to grow dim.** What causes *our eyesight to grow dim*? *Endless distraction? Certitude? Fear? Consuming anxiety?* The *pace of life* that makes *our eyelids heavy when we need to be keeping our eyes wide open*?

And when **God's voice does waken the young Samuel, who then comes to wise ol' Eli for discernment**, *what gets in Eli's way of perceiving the true nature of the voice that has called out to this young boy*? Is it just *sheer weariness* that has ceased to believe that God will actually show up? Is it *resignation* and an *inability to believe* that something powerful may yet break through? Is it just a *lack of imagination* that God indeed chooses the most unlikely vessels to give voice to divine desire? Is it *fear of what might be revealed*? Why does it take *three times of "I'm not calling you, Samuel; this isn't coming from me"* to **finally get to the question that matters**, “*Then who? Then who is calling you, Samuel? It's the Lord. Go and listen to the voice of the Lord.*”

*There is a bit of Eli that is slow to catch on living in all of our souls.*

And then there's *the Samuel within us*. That *part of our soul and spirit that is eager to hear, that does long to understand those calls that come to us* in the middle of the night that are *hard to tease out* because they catch us so off-guard. There is that *part of us that longs to be close to the Presence of the Lord*, but still *needs help* to know *what to do when that Presence actually*

*speaks to us. There is that part of us that wants the authority to tell us what to do with this spiritual encounter, when what we need to do is **go back and lie down** and open ourselves fully to the experience, daring to believe that God is **standing there** longing to speak a word **to us**.*

And **God, God** has all the time in the world. **God calls; we think it's something else. God calls; we think it's something else. God calls; we think it's something else. God comes and stands there, and calls again, gets right up in our presence**, like when you move from *yelling up the stairs to your child to wake up* AND finally *go into their room and stand over their bed and call them*—it makes a difference, yes? **God comes and stands there, and calls again, and we hear.**

Now, *what we hear is not always comfortable*. Sometimes, it's a *big dose of truth that needs to be spoken that we know the authority figure is not going to want to hear*. And here, here I tip my hat to **Eli**. Eli knows **his sons** have **done some horrible things**, totally **abused their office and their power**, and he knows **a reckoning is coming**. And *Eli has the courage to hear the truth and wade into the reckoning—hiding from the truth will serve no one*.

And **Samuel** finds the courage to speak it, cost him what it might, knowing that *when the Lord has touched your tongue, you can do no other*.

And **both of these individuals, both of them are clay jars**, so full of potential, so capable of holding wonderful things, so limited, so prone-to-brokenness, so inextricably tied to earth, so dusty, so utterly human. And as we know ourselves, as we look out upon the world from the inside of our thoughts and actions and omissions and mixed motivations; we know that we, **like Eli and Samuel, are clay jars, too**.

So were **the disciples who were hungry on the sabbath**. It doesn't matter **if the rules say you can't pluck grain on the sabbath**, *when you're hungry, you're hungry*. It doesn't matter **if you're ineligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program because your income puts you out of range or you can't meet the work guidelines**, *when you're hungry, you're hungry*. It doesn't matter **if the calendar says school lunches won't happen because school won't be in session**, *when you're hungry, you're hungry*. **"The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."** Jesus tells a great story to those **rule-followers who were challenging what his disciples were doing to feed their hunger**; a great story *straight out of their tradition*—Jesus told of how **the great David entered the house of God and let his companions eat the bread of Presence which only the priests got to eat**. *"Oh Pharisees,"* Jesus says, *"Even our heroes will bend the rules for the sake of human need."* **Clay jars need care, and sometimes, the rules just don't cut it.**

And then there was **the man with the withered hand**. The **rule-followers** would *rather have the man stay incapacitated, unable to live and work from a place of wholeness, than to risk a crack in the coherence of their rules and tradition*. **Jesus is angry, grieved at their hard hearts, and he heals the man anyway**, knowing that this will land him in a boatload of hot water. And land him in hot water it did—**"The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him."**

*But the Pharisees are also clay jars, and their **hard hearts** make them brittle. One must ask, “Why, why do they cling to their rules and traditions? Why do they preserve them at all costs when a human being is so clearly in need right in front of them? What do they fear will happen if the rule bends? Is it about maintaining power and control, or is it about the terror that comes if we surrender that control—our fear that chaos will ensue and that chaos will swamp us?”*

*It’s not that the law is bad, and Jesus certainly says as much elsewhere, “I didn’t come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it,” BUT IT IS about understanding that **the law is always in service to living a life of love and right relationship with God and one another and ourselves.** Jesus will always challenge us when that law is serving our deepest fears, instead of our deepest loves, and he won’t be gentle in the challenge.*

We miss the boat if we *only judge the Pharisees and don’t ask what’s driving them to cling to the rules above all else* because truth be told, *we all have a Pharisee lurking inside of us*, it’s just that *we pick and choose which rules we refuse to relinquish.*

But the place where we finally want to stand this morning is **II Corinthians**. Hear Paul again, “**But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.**”

*We are clay jars, but we hold treasure within us. We are limited, fallible, dusty, broken creatures, and the power of God shines through us. Afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. WOW.*

*We may be clay, but the strength that resides within that clay is astounding because God is the potter who makes us, shapes us, forms us and reforms us, not once, but over and over again, if we’ll but let God have God’s way with us. Paul reminds us that we are always carrying the death of Jesus in us, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in us. We are always dying, and always rising, always. Our deepest scars are also the wellsprings of life. Following the rules perfectly will never get you there, never. But letting what needs to die die and letting what needs to rise rise—this is what it means to live in the power of the resurrection. Clay jars and treasure always go hand-in-hand.*

So, today is full of *paradox*. **Eli and Samuel. Pharisees and rules and hunger and healing. Clay jars and treasure. You and me. Always dying, always rising.** Today, we remember, *there is so much beauty, pure treasure, to be found in these old clay jars.* Amen.

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