

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

There is no question that we are in the middle of a **reckoning**—both on a *collective* and quite possibly *individual* level.

Reckonings are not new. In fact, we witness a pretty powerful one this morning in the **call story of Samuel** from our first lesson.

We often **focus** and **Eli's dim sight**, both *figuratively* and *literally*, and his **inability to figure out what's going on**.

We **focus** on **Samuel's youthful openness** and his **capacity to hear**. *However, nothing in his life thus far has prepared him to know what to do with this voice.* We could lay that off on his **inexperience**, but I dare say that **most of us struggle to know what to do with of the voice of the LORD**, especially when it wakes us out of a dead sleep.

We **focus** on **Samuel's tenacity to keep coming back**, saying, "*Uh, Eli, I heard it again.*" And we **focus** on **Eli finally sensing what's going on** and **giving Samuel a good principle of discernment**—"Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'"

But there is a **more haunting piece of this story** that calls out to us today, and it's **the message** that the **LORD delivers once Samuel is really dialed into the voice**. Hear this again:

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." Then the LORD said to 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."

We then hear that **Samuel lay there until morning**. In other words, he didn't sleep a wink after that.

So, what's the backstory here. Well, **Eli's house had a long tradition of serving at the LORD's altar**—going all the way back to the **time in Egypt**. His line had been **given a sacred trust to serve the LORD** and to enable the **people of God to make their very best offerings to God**. But **Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phineas, got corrupted** along the way. **Great responsibility often comes with great privilege**, and **privilege can lead us down the road of entitlement**, and **entitlement can open up an insatiable hunger**, and if you **strip away all the fancy trappings of entitlement**, you often find go ol' fashioned greed.

So, there was **this practice around offerings** where the **people would bring their very best offering** and the **priest would stick it in a boiling pot**. Then, the **priest got to take a three-pronged fork** and **stick it into the pot** and **whatever meat came up was the priest's**. Not a bad deal.

But **Hophni and Phineas weren't satisfied with that**. They had their servant say to the one who was sacrificing, **"Give meat for the priest to roast; for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw."** And if they wouldn't give the meat in advance, the servant would say, **"No, you must give it now; if not, I will take it by force."** This did not sit well with the LORD because **they treated the offerings of the Lord with contempt**.

And *entitlement* with the offerings led Hophni and Phineas to *entitlement* with women's bodies. They *lay with the women who served at the entrance of the tent of meeting*. Such entitlement has a way of expanding and pretty soon, *you believe everything is rightfully yours*.

The consequences for this behavior will be severe—it will destroy Hophni and Phineas, and it will devastate Eli, and Eli bears responsibility because he *knew of this iniquity* and he *did nothing to restrain them*. In the Hebrew, this *"failure to restrain"* is a *"failure in strength;"* it's about *our inability to muster the strength to stop the abuse of power, position, and privilege; our inability to set and hold the boundary*.

Samuel, little, young, inexperienced Samuel is the one whom God chooses to call out this abuse of power. *He doesn't want to deliver this message to his mentor*. But God has laid this hard call upon him, and on some level, Samuel knows there is no way around this. So, when Eli called out to Samuel the next morning, Samuel answered his mentor with the same receptivity that he had answered the LORD—"Here I am;" Samuel was *surrendered* to his role in this reckoning. And to Eli's credit, he told Samuel *not to hold back, not to hide anything from him*. So, Samuel told him *everything* and hid *nothing* from him.

Then [Eli] said, **"It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."** *Eli's sight might have grown dim, but he was wise; he knew this reckoning had to be to restore trust in those who would serve the LORD and the people of God. This accountability would be costly, but Eli also knew it was absolutely necessary*.

And, 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. *Everyone knew* that Samuel was faithful and that he had the capacity to stand firm, *no matter how hard it was to deliver the prophetic word given him*.

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And there is **also a reckoning** of sorts going on in I Corinthians today. The first two sentences of the passage today say this: **"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial.** **"All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything.**

And this is the crux of the matter, then and now. We have a **plentitude of rights, of things that are lawful for us to do**, but *that doesn't mean our exercise of those rights is beneficial*. The Greek word for *"beneficial"* here means *"to bring together, to bear together, to carry with*

others.” Yes, I have my rights, but my exercising them won’t necessarily bring us *closer*, and it *may*, in fact, drive us *further* apart.

Paul continues with this notion that “*all things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.*” The Greek here for “*dominated*” actually means “*to be mastered, to be brought under the power of another.*”

Paul is brilliant on the subject of rights. He is clear that he has untold freedom, *and yet*, he *also knows* that another, One greater than he, Christ, has a *claim* on him. Paul has so much freedom, *but in Christ, he surrenders that freedom for the sake of a brother or sister. Paul knows* that unlimited, untethered freedom can leave us open to a tyranny of *domination* and *competing exercises of power. Paul knows* a fundamental truth—*untethered from my communion with you, untethered from my communion with you whom Christ loves and for whom Christ died, I am sunk.*

So, where do Eli and his sons and Samuel and Paul leave us today?

Eli’s sons lift before our eyes the price of entitlement and greed and abuse of human beings left unchecked.

Eli lifts before us the danger of looking the other way as this behavior continues to grow and grow and refusing to hold one accountable for such behavior.

Samuel lifts before us *the choice*—are we willing to wrestle with *the voice* that we can’t make sense of? Are we willing to keep putting ourself in the position to hear *whatever* it is that *this voice wants* to say to us? Are we willing to have the audacity to admit that God *does* indeed speak to us in the middle of the night, or at high noon, or at any number of other times of the day or night? Are we willing to accept that God will choose the likes of you *and me* to deliver a hard word of truth to those in power *and* to those closest in our lives, a word that we *so don’t want* to deliver but yet *must* be delivered nonetheless?

And, back to Eli, he also lifts before us the humility we need when someone stands before us with a hard word that *we* need to hear.

We all have a part to play in *this* reckoning—some of us will need to speak, some of us will need to listen—*most likely, God will call us to do both by turns.*

Paul is lifting before us this whole question of rights, *of what is lawful*, and calling us to a higher freedom, a greater freedom—the freedom *not* to exercise our rights *for the sake of the other*. The willingness to *yield* what we believe we are due is what *true* freedom looks like. Surrendered to Christ, we truly are not dominated by *anything* because we have *no need* to hold power *over* *and* we know that ultimately *no one* has final power *over us*. It’s the freedom that comes to the mystics even when they are sitting in prison, even when the authorities would take their life.

As we **continue** to live through the reckoning underway in our day on every conceivable level, *all* of these characters illuminate the very real dangers and opportunities before us. The path ahead will look different for each one of us, and until it is clear *what* that path is to be, we *wait*. We find a space of quiet to wait on *the voice* and let it say to us what it must. When we hear it calling, we answer, “Here I am.” We keep showing up and listening, until the shape of the message becomes clear, and then we speak it to those to whom we’ve been sent.

God will give us the strength we need to be *trustworthy prophets* of the word that *God wishes* to speak into this moment. It won’t be easy; in fact, it could be quite costly, but speak we must. God is calling us to tether our rights, *once again*, to our communion *with* one another, to our communion *with* Christ, to Jesus in whose body *we are all knit together as members of one another*.

This is hard work, and I think the work will get harder in the days and weeks ahead. So much is at stake. We know this, and so does God. God can’t speak without the Samuels who are *willing to hear* and *risk bearing the hard truths* that pave the way for transformation. And God can’t challenge a world rampant with absolute, zero-sum-game rights *if there aren’t those willing to live with a different understanding of rights tethered to the other*.

Hold fast, dear brothers and sisters. Our call this day is *hard, but we don’t ever do this work alone*. Jesus has knit us into his body *and* given us each other. Lean hard into *that truth* and then be the *trustworthy prophet our world so needs* to guide us through this reckoning. Amen.

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