

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time 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!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he 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 he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." 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 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."

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

"Tell Everything, Hide Nothing!"

Some years ago I read a short story about a Presbyterian minister in Virginia who encountered God in a new way while working in his garden. It was a hot, humid summer day. His wife was across the yard barbecuing at the grill and the minister was working at clearing weeds. Suddenly, and out of nowhere, someone called his name. After looking across the yard at his wife who is oblivious to what has just occurred and doing a 360° to see if someone is messing around with him, the Voice spoke to him again. I don't remember what the Voice said to him in the story, but the minister came to believe that it was God speaking to him, out loud. He was troubled by what had happened. The minister decided to disclose what had happened to his wife. Now she was raised Baptist and didn't think there was anything was odd about God speaking to him. God spoke, had he listened?

He spent all night agonizing about whether to tell his congregation about what had happened. His congregants were well educated, life long Presbyterians who weren't used to this type of emotionally disconcerting revelation from their minister. Truth be told the minister wasn't used to it either. He attended a seminary that took critical study of the scriptures seriously because the Word of God was where God disclosed God's self.

When the minister came to the end of his sermon the next morning he paused. It was a long pause. Then the story of God speaking to him in his garden came spilling out. He thought he should be feeling joy, but inside, he was shaking with fear.

The minister could tell by the look on their faces that his story of God speaking to him was not being well received. Congregation members shook his hand at the door, said very little to him and hurried off to their cars. Later that week two elders stopped by his house. They had called a session meeting that night which ended in a motion and a unanimous vote. They voted to give their minister some time off, a vacation. A break would do him good they said. He'd been working too hard. The minister replied by saying the only thing he felt he could. "Thanks. I'll take a few weeks starting tomorrow."

Instead of sharing an interpretation of prophecy stemming from the scriptures and applying it to today's world he had shared God's direct word to him on a particular day! But who believes that God speaks to us in this way these days? His congregation thought their minister was simply overwrought, possibly delusional. The minister wasn't sure of what had really happened either. Maybe he was too tired.

Telling others everything we know to be true about God is absurd if the goal is to keep faith comfortable for ourselves and others.

Samuel had to make a similar decision to the minister's. He was chosen by God to restate God's punishment of Eli and his family. Eli's sons were abusing their priestly authority by taking the fat from people's sacrifices to God and having sex with servants of the temple, abusing them. Eli, the spiritual leader of Israel, did not take the time or have the oomph to check his son's disregard for God and God's people. He is complicit in his sons' unrighteousness. One Old Testament scholar tells us, "Samuel was called by God in a time of spiritual desolation, religious corruption, personal immorality, political danger, and social upheaval. Sound familiar?"ⁱ It was just as hard for Samuel to be faithful to God's call to prophecy as it is for us to tell what God has revealed to us today.

The scriptures make it clear that the life of a prophet is demanding—because God's message is demanding. The call stories in our scriptures are not Hallmark moments. They are theophanies; reports of God revealing God's self to an individual or community, and to us. God's word to Samuel made him fear the approaching morning. He went and lay in his bed and wondered what would happen if Eli wanted to know God's word.

One group of scholars noted that at this point in the text we see that God overthrows the old order of reality. "There is a deep dread in the narrative as divine assertion marks the delegitimation of the priestly family and of the entire symbol system on which Israel had come to rely."ⁱⁱ They mean that the rituals and sacrifices of Israel were empty because institutional and individual corruption had led the people of God astray. Corrupt practices drew the people further away from reconciliation with God. God would not accept a substitution for worship and covenant faithfulness. In this moment in the history of Israel, God demanded more and raised Samuel as God's new leader to reach the people Israel and lead them to righteousness. Samuel did not know how things would shake out. Yet he chose to obey Eli and God and told Eli everything, hiding nothing.

The holy voice intrudes in our lives where and when we least expect God. For God will not give in to corruption in institutional religion or in our personal, social, and national lives either. Do we have eyes to see and ears to listen and voices to proclaim what God calls us to as the church today?

Our two lectionary texts are of people who encounter God and then proclaim what they saw or heard. They tell everything and hide nothing. Nathanael even reverses his position when all he had believed to be true about the messiah was turned upside down as he encountered God in Jesus.

Encounters with God are unpredictable. They catch us by surprise, interrupt our familiar routines and challenge our assumptions. Even scarier, God's word for us is for the here and now, not for some distant future. God seeks our response now not in the next generation! For how could God who makes all things into a new creation not shake old things up? Maybe it is time for us to look to Eli's faith. He messed up some things and he knows it. Even so, Eli guided Samuel on his way to know God and he accepted the will of God to pull his house from priestly duty forever so that Israel could be redeemed. "It is the Lord; let God do what seems good."ⁱⁱⁱ

Because God has overturned the old order of reality as we knew it our faith leads us to proclaim what we now see clearly, even if we are fearful of that proclamation. It may be we are led to call out for help with something we are personally ashamed of or fear being judged by others about. It may be our call to speak a voice of truth to ourselves and our neighbors about injustice locally and the life of the world. It may be our call to share a personal word of comfort God has given us with someone who desperately needs consolation.

What does God require of us? To tell the truth revealed to us. Confession and proclamation of what we have seen, heard, and know to be true. It sounds grandiose and it would be wishful thinking if we were to try to tell everything and hide nothing on our own strength and courage.

This is a realization Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. came to in his life. An excerpt from Dr. King illustrates his struggle to keep telling the truth about segregation, poverty and the wars and conflicts of his day. “Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over at the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. ‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.’ At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: ‘Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.’”^{iv}

King was not a perfect man. History now claims his indiscretions as part of the whole picture of who he was. He may not have been a saint, if there is such a thing, but he was a modern day prophet and a man of faith who called a nation into the change God desired by telling everything and hiding nothing about the sins of racism, poverty, and the tragedy of war.

Even though we fall short of righteous living, we are always to proclaim God’s grace intended for the world in righteousness, love, peace, reconciliation, sharing of resources.

Understanding God’s revelation to us is never a road we travel alone. Both Nathanael and Samuel had people who helped them along the way.

Later on in the short story I began with, on the night that the Elders came to put the minister “on vacation,” the minister lay in his bed listening to the sounds of the evening, struggling to fall asleep. Then the Voice spoke to him again. This time he recognized God right away. He lay still and listened. After awhile he looked over at his wife who was sound asleep. She never doubted the validity of what had happened days before and she wasn’t worried about the church’s views either! Smiling, he realized that this time God spoke just to him. God had provided the word of encouragement he needed at this hour. The Voice was God and he was not having a breakdown. So he laid his head back against his pillow and fell into a deep, nourishing sleep.⁵ Amen.

ⁱ Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Studying the Revised Common Lectionary Year B* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2002) 65.

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year B* (Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 199) 107.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sam. 3:18.

^{iv} Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, (Fortress Press)134-5.

⁵ Peggy Payne, “The Pure in Heart”, in *God: Stories*, Ed. C. Michael Curtis (Houghton Mifflin Company: USA, 1998) 222-35. When I wrote this sermon I was going off my memory of this story, which I read years ago. The actual short story differs from my memory! I claim all nonfactual embellishments.