

June 3, 2018: 2nd Sunday after Pentecost / Youth Sunday (Year B)
1 Samuel 3:1-20: The Flame Still Flickers

“This world is a dark place, and it’s getting darker by the minute.”

It’s a common refrain. One I hear quite often. Not always in those exact words, but however people say it, the meaning is basically the same. People look at the world we live in, and all the things that are going on, and are filled with hopelessness, despair, disgust, sadness, even fear. It is when they try to put those feelings into words that they end up saying something like that.

I hear it most often on the lips of people with many, many, many years in their rear view mirror. In other words, old people. It makes sense. The world today must seem very different than the one they grew up in. I have a great aunt who recently passed away at the age of 98. I can’t even begin to imagine the changes she saw and experienced over the course of her lifetime.

Even still, talking like that can be very discouraging for people who hopefully have many years of life left, especially those of us with children. After making a statement about how dark the world has become, people will follow it up with something like, “I can’t imagine trying to raise a child in this environment.” I want to say, with a hint of sarcasm, “I have children, thanks for the words of encouragement.” For the parents of our graduating seniors who are about to send your children out into the world, I’m sure it’s the last thing you want to hear.

I can’t be too critical though. I have noticed myself feeling the same way sometimes. Then again, I’m not exactly a young person anymore. When I was working as a teacher in a public high school a few years ago I don’t know how many times I came home after dealing with 14 and 15 year olds doing things, bad things, things I never even would have dreamed of doing, and asked Dawn the same question: “Has the world really changed that much, or is it just the particular school I happen to work in?”

I tell you this to say that for those of you who think we are living in dark days; I see where you are coming from. The people of Israel, living in the days when God called Samuel, could have also seen where you are coming from. They were living in dark days as well. This was a tumultuous, uncertain, and frightening time in Israel’s history. Some of the reasons are fairly evident from the passage we heard read this morning. We will look at those in just a moment. Others you can discover by just doing a little research into the historical context.

First, the Israelites were living under a constant threat of attack by the neighboring Philistines. Both nations were trying to gain possession of more land to support their growing populations, and the competition was fierce. The Philistines were greater in number and militarily superior. They would use these advantages to defeat the Israelites in battle and to conduct raids on Israelite border settlements.

Another factor facing Israel was the growing social and political pressure to move from a loosely organized tribal system where rule was administered by judges to a centralized government that was ruled by a king. All the surrounding nations were moving in this direction, but many Israelites did not believe it was consistent with God’s will for them.

Turning to our passage for today we see that the word of the Lord was rare in those days. At this point in Israel’s history, God spoke to his people primarily through priests, especially the high priest, who was considered the spokesperson for God, and it had been this way for centuries. The priests would hear a

word from the Lord and then pass it along to the people. This was the only way they could receive guidance and direction from God. Yet this was not occurring, at least not very often.

Visions were another way God communicated to his people. Like a word from the Lord, visions typically came by way of the priests or other religious leaders. We learn in this passage though that visions were not widespread. At a time when Israel needed to hear from God more than ever, the lines of communication had completely broken down. If we take a look in the previous chapter, the reasons will become immediately clear.

In 1 Samuel 2:12-13 we find these words, “Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people.” Eli was the high priest, and his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, also priests, were involved in all sorts of corruption. They were using abusing their authority, treating the offerings of the Lord with contempt, and had turned the sanctuary at Shiloh into a brothel of sorts. They were not in any position to serve as mediators between God and his people.

For his part, Eli was not participating in their behavior, but neither was he doing anything to prevent it. In the second verse Eli is described as one whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see. This could have been a reference to his ability to see physically, but in the context we understand it is also the author’s way of saying he was also losing his ability to see spiritually. His ineffective leadership, and his inability or refusal to change his sons’ behavior was preventing him from serving as God demanded and the people needed.

If we take all this into account, the threat of the Philistines, the social and political pressure, and the blatant corruption of their religious leaders, we can see that Israel was experiencing some very dark days indeed, but the lamp of God had not gone out. The flame was still flickering in the darkness. Again, this could be a reference to a literal lamp that would be lit during each night in the temple, and extinguished at sunrise each morning. This tells us that God spoke to Samuel while it was still night. But it tells us so much more. It points beyond the literal meaning, telling us that God’s light had not been overcome by the darkness. The calling of Samuel is proof of that.

Samuel was just a boy of around twelve years of age when God called him. His childhood was not typical by any stretch of the imagination. Even how he came to live at Shiloh is an interesting story. His mother Hannah had been unable to bear children. On one of her family’s annual trips to Shiloh to worship, Hannah had offered a heartfelt prayer to God in which she promised that if He would bless her with a child, she would dedicate him to a life of service. Samuel was born soon after, and at the age of three she entrusted him to the care of Eli. He had lived there ever since, learning how to assist in leading the worship at Shiloh.

Even still, he was young, but his age did not seem to matter to God. Maybe it was an asset to him, because Israel was about to enter into a time of major transition. Being young, Samuel wasn’t entrenched in the old way of doing things. And he had not succumbed to the apathy and complacency, and even pessimism that is a temptation for all of us as we grow older. And he lived expectantly; he slept near the ark of the Lord, which was considered the footstool of God’s throne, wanting to be in a place where God could speak.

To be fair, Samuel was also naïve and inexperienced. When God called to him that night he did not recognize that it was Him. He had never heard God’s voice before to know the difference. He thought it was Eli. Three times God called out to him. Three times he ran to Eli to see what he needed. Though Eli was far from perfect, he did know the Lord. With his wisdom, gained from years of experience, he

eventually discerned it could only be the voice of God that Samuel was hearing. Samuel was dependent on Eli to finally make the connection, and hear what it was the Lord wanted to say to him.

We can't overlook the way Eli responded to all this, especially given the message that Samuel heard from God. Eli was a descendant of Aaron, the first High Priest of Israel. God had made a promise to Aaron many years ago that his descendants would be priests forever. Eli had inherited this legacy, but on account of the corruption of his sons, the privilege was being taken away. His sons were going to be killed, and God was going to raise up a faithful priest to take his place. As devastated as Eli must have been to receive this news, his response was to say, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

There is really something in this story for everyone.

For all of us...reminder that the lamp of God is still burning. The world can be a very dark place. Some days it seems darker than others. But God has not left us. And he's not going to. He is still moving in our world. Still calling people to do great things for the Kingdom. So no matter how dark the world becomes, we should always be hopeful people.

Looking at the youth in our church, I'm hopeful this morning. I'm excited to see how God is going to use them to serve him.

There is a lesson here for those of us who are young. You need to know that when it comes to who God can call to accomplish his purposes, age is irrelevant. And sometimes, being young, can be an asset. None of you are too young to be used of God.

Samuel is your example. He teaches you to...

- Be dedicated to God, committed, and open to what God wants to say to you.
- Recognize the wisdom of those who are older and more experienced and go to them for guidance.
- Embrace the role God has for you, not because you are amazing, but because you trust that God can do amazing things through you...

There is a lesson here for those of us who are a little older. We need to remember not to be down on the youth of today and recognize their value and potential, as God does.

Eli is our example...

- Be a help, not a hindrance
- Accept change with grace, when that change is coming from God...
- Accept the leadership, the service, and the ministry of people younger than you...

With that said, I'm going to invite the individuals who are going to assist us in the celebration of Communion this morning. These individuals represent our future, and the future looks bright, because God is in it.