

Message for January 18, 2015
Glennon Heights Mennonite Church
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Scripture passage: 1 Samuel 3:1-20

Hearing, speaking, listening, trusting

You're probably tired of hearing this, but things change. This is a constant theme. Change, change, change. Change is good. Change is hard. Change is inevitable. Don't stand in the way of change. As Christians we believe that God changes us. God changes us from isolated to connected, from unloved to deeply loved, from dead to alive. Change is good. Change is hard. And even though we may resist it, change is inevitable.

Our scripture passage today is all about change. Eli and his two sons have been priests in Israel for quite a while. Eli has been faithful in his service to the Lord, but his sons are bad apples. They are "scoundrels," it says in 1 Samuel 2, verse 12. "They had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people." They take the best of the meat that people bring as offerings for themselves. They lay with the women who serve at the entrance of the tent of meeting. They continue to serve as priests, but they have no respect for God or people. Eli has rebuked them. He has pleaded with them. But "they would not listen to the voice of their father." This situation is very bad. It is so bad that a prophet of the Lord declares to Eli that there is no alternative but to destroy his whole family. Because of this situation, there is great distance between God and the people. "The word of the Lord was rare in those days," it says in chapter 3, verse 1. "Visions were not widespread." Something has to change.

When we pick up the story, it is nighttime in the temple, which is a not a building but a tent at this point in the history of Israel. The prophet Eli is resting. He is an old

man. And probably very discouraged with how things are going. He is in his room in the temple tent. Samuel is there, too, in the sanctuary, lying down near the ark of God – the chest which is the centerpiece of Israel’s worship. Samuel is a teenager by this time, or perhaps a young man in his early twenties. He’s been living with Eli in the temple since he was a little boy. He’s been learning the ways of worship at Eli’s feet. He has been nurtured and formed in the faith. However, he’s still pretty green and untested. There is still much he needs to learn.

As he is lying there in the middle of the night, Samuel hears someone calling his name: “Samuel! Samuel!” He gets up and goes to Eli. “Here I am!” he says to Eli, “you called me.” No, says Eli, I didn’t call you. Go back to sleep. Samuel returns to his bed. But this happens again. Samuel hears his name being called and he does the sensible thing; he goes again to Eli, the only other person in the place. But Eli sends him back to bed. “I did not call you,” he says. This sequence has to happen three times before Eli finally figures out that it must be the Lord who is calling Samuel. The text tells us that this is not something that Samuel could figure out on his own. “Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord,” it says in verse 7, “and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.” Samuel needs Eli, his older, more experienced mentor, to guide him. He needs Eli to say, “I think it is God who is speaking to you, Samuel.” He needs Eli to help him hear God’s voice.

Pointing this out to Samuel is no small thing on Eli’s part. Being spoken to by God is Eli’s role, his place, his job. He is the high priest and prophet. He is the expert. He is the one with years of experience. God should be talking with him, not this very young up-start Samuel who doesn’t even know what’s going on. Eli could have refused

to cooperate with God. He could have refused to help Samuel understand what was happening in an effort to keep this special role and relationship for himself. But what we see instead is an act of great humility and deep trust: Eli helps Samuel out. Eli explains to Samuel that it is God who is calling him. And Eli tells Samuel how to respond. He prepares Samuel for the privilege of encountering God, a privilege that he once held for himself. He is able to turn that privilege over to Samuel.

Samuel returns to his place by the ark. He lies down. Again he hears a voice calling his name. This time he stays put and says to God, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” Then he hears what the Lord has to say.

What Samuel hears from the Lord is not something that fills his heart with joy. In fact, I imagine his heart pounding and his stomach twisting as he hears what God says to him. There are no comforting promises or affirmations of steadfast love. Instead, the message that he hears is a confirmation that disaster is indeed coming to Eli and his family. Because of what Eli’s sons have done and are doing, and because Eli has not been able to restrain them, Eli’s family will all die. His family will come to an end. And there is nothing they can do about it.

After hearing these hard words of the Lord, “Samuel lay there until morning,” it says in verse 15. Can’t you just imagine what that must have been like? Can’t you see him tossing and turning and wondering how he’s going to deal with this? What on earth is he going to say when Eli asks him what happened? Is there any way he can get out of passing on this horrible message? Why did God have to tell him this? Why does he have to be caught in the middle of this horrible mess? He is afraid, it says in verse 15. I imagine him thinking, “Oh, I hope Eli doesn’t ask me about this. I hope I won’t have to

“speak what was spoken to me.”

But Eli does ask. He asks even though he knows it probably won't be good news. “Tell me what the Lord had to say to you last night,” he says to Samuel. “Don't hide it from me or you'll find yourself in real trouble.” Eli doesn't avoid that which is difficult. And he doesn't allow Samuel to avoid it either. Even though it can only mean trouble for him, Eli doesn't bail out at this point. He continues teaching Samuel what it means to be a messenger for God. He encourages Samuel to do what needs to be done. He makes it possible for Samuel to speak.

Not only does he encourage Samuel to speak, but Eli, the experienced, respected high priest and prophet, listens to what Samuel, who is young and inexperienced, has to say. Eli listens with respect. He doesn't protest. He doesn't say, you ignoramus, you must have heard it all wrong. He doesn't dismiss Samuel's words on account that this was a first-time experience so how could Samuel have possibly understood. Instead, Eli listens. Attentively. And he accepts as valid what Samuel has to say. “It is the Lord,” Eli responds, “let him do what seems good to him.”

In this story we see change taking place. The old – Eli and sons – are on the way out. The new – Samuel as God's chosen prophet – is being established. It is change that is not easy. In fact it's catastrophic from Eli's point of view. He has to let go of everything, give up everything to make way for what is to come. What is truly amazing is that he, as a faithful servant of God, is still able to lean into this difficult process, which he knows comes from God. He is able to help it along. Eli provides for us a model of what it means to be open to new revelation and a new way of working in the Lord. Eli provides for us a model of deep trust, of accepting and making possible God's change

even when it is incredibly difficult, even when it means letting go of everything we hold dear.

“Here I am,” Samuel says to Eli, “for you called me.” “I did not call,” Eli responds, “but I am here for you. I’ll help you know how to hear what God is saying. And when you’ve heard, you will need to speak, even if the words are difficult to say. To make it possible for you to speak, I will listen. I will listen, even if what you have to say is difficult for me to hear. I am here with you as you learn to be who God is calling you to be. Here I am, letting go of what I have been holding onto so that you can move forward with God. I am able to do this because I trust that God, who has worked through me, is now working through you.”

In our life together as followers of Christ, we need fresh voices and we need well-seasoned wisdom. We need new ideas and we need the perspective of experience. Our God who is eternal is always moving, building, drawing new folks in and pushing the limits of that which is familiar. God, the steadfast, is making all things new. And God is calling us to be part of this firmly rooted movement, this life-giving change.

Brothers and sisters, let’s keep our hearts and ears open. Let’s encourage one another to hear. Is that God’s voice you’re hearing? Isn’t that God calling your name? Listen, we need to say to each other: God is speaking to you. What do you hear? Your experience is valid. Trust what the Holy Spirit is saying to your heart.

Let’s encourage each other to speak: Tell me what you heard. Don’t be afraid to say what’s on your heart, even if it will be difficult for me to hear. Be strong and courageous, trusting God to be with you. Tell us your hopes and dreams, your fears and misgivings. Speak of the hard things which challenge you and that you share as a

challenge to all of us. Tell us the things that God has put on your heart to share.

In order for this speaking to happen we need to be willing to listen with respect to each other, especially to those who are just finding their voice, to those whose experience may challenge our status quo. We must trust God to be present in the words we hear even if they push us into areas of discomfort.

Along with Samuel and with Eli, let us say to each other and to God, “Here I am. Here we are. Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening, to you and to each other. Give us strength. Give us courage. Give us hearts that are open to your leading even when the change you bring about is difficult. Help us encourage and support each other as we learn, continually, what it means to follow you. Help us listen deeply, trusting that you are always with us. Amen.”