

In the Year of the Bible, we start in on reading the narratives of First and Second Samuel this week. Which means you can give yourselves a pat on the back for surviving Joshua and Judges! I love these books and I hope you will too. This narrative is a page turner! And I find a lot of connections between life in the text and life today whenever I read it.

In the section immediately preceding what we read this morning, Hannah brings her son, Samuel to the temple. She is one more of the barren women of the Old Testament who have prayed and prayed for children. When the Lord gives her Samuel, she offers him back to the Lord and he is raised in the temple by the Priest Eli. Hannah's story will show up in the lectionary, so we'll visit her story again. Don't race past Hannah's story as you read 1 Samuel.

*Dynasty
Sept 20, 2009*

*1 Sam 2:26-36
YotB*

Marci Auld Glass

Eli is the priest at Shiloh and he seems to be a decent priest, but his children are not. Remember that during the Exodus, the family of Aaron become the priests. They are from the tribe of Levi, so it is the Levites, as a clan, who fill the priestly function. They don't have tribal lands the same way the other tribes do. Eli is in this line of inherited priesthood. And God has promised Dynasty to them. Remember back in Exodus 28, and all of that language of "Aaron and his sons shall serve the Lord....and it shall be a perpetual ordinance for him and for his descendants after him...."

Well, generations have gone by, and listen to how Eli's sons, Aaron's great great grandsons, are filling God's ordinance: from earlier in 1 Sam 2, beginning with verse 12:

"Now, the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people. When anyone offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three pronged fork in his hand, and he would thrust it deep into the pan, or kettle, or

cauldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there..."

In the tradition of corrupt officials everywhere, Eli's sons are skimming off the top. Literally, in this case, taking the best of the meat before it has even had the chance to be offered to God.

So God expresses God's displeasure with the sons of Eli and decides that this particular dynasty is going to come to an end.

Now, as Americans who got rid of our monarch a few hundred years ago, I think we tend to associate dynasties with other people and other places. Because anyone can grow up to be President in the US! But there are lots of dynasties that aren't political ones. So pay attention to where the potential dynasties may be in your life.

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So don't dismiss this story as something belonging to another age or to other people.

So, we have this story of Eli and his scoundrel sons who didn't care so much for either the Lord or for their duties to the people of the Lord. And this story is woven into the narrative about Samuel. Samuel, who was not from the tribe of Levi but from the tribe of Ephraim. Samuel, who did not have any family connections or privilege. Samuel who surely had no expectations that he would become a priest. His future was as a servant in the temple.

These books bear Samuel's name, but in truth, they are the beginnings of the narrative of the kings of Israel. King Saul, King David. It is as if, before the crown is ever put on someone's head, God wants us to remember that dynasties don't always work out the way you want them too. The people, we'll discover, will be begging for kings. And the

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*grown man who has become priest Samuel will tell them,
“you don’t know what you’re asking. This isn’t what you
really want.”*

*And Samuel should know. Because he saw the heartbreak on
his mentor Eli’s face whenever Eli thought of his scoundrel
sons. Samuel was put in the unenviable position of being
everything that Eli hoped and prayed his own children would
be.*

*I think this story is also a reminder to us that while parents do
bear all of the hurt and pain that result when their children
are scoundrels, it isn’t always the parents fault. It certainly
isn’t clear in this text that it is Eli’s fault. Eli was a good priest.
He presumably taught his children how to live. He certainly
told his children that they should change their evil ways. But
they would not listen to the voice of their father.*

There are many other similar texts in the Bible, and in our lives, that should be cautionary tales, helping us remember to be careful before assigning blame to parents for their childrens' sins.

So, think of what it would have been like to be Samuel, growing up in that temple. You see your parents maybe a few times a year, so Eli really functions as your father. But Eli's sons certainly don't act like your brothers. You try to serve God faithfully, but you watch Eli's sons stealing the best part of the offering, interfering in people's worship. And whenever you get that look on your face, the one that makes your disgust with their behavior clear, they say to you, "sorry son of Ephraim. Too bad you weren't born a Levite. And don't go getting any ideas. You'll never be priest. God has said that only Levites shall serve".

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Think just how aggravating that would be. Because they are right. They may be scoundrels, but they know their scripture. God DID say that Levites were to be the priests forever. And only Levites. There is no provision in the law for nice Benjaminites to be priests. No allowance for especially faithful Ephraimites to serve.

There it is, right there in the Bible. Only the sons of Aaron will be priests.

Perhaps that is why Eli's sons acted the way they did.

Because humans are not at our best when we think God has endorsed our positions uncritically. Perhaps mistaking God's favor for their privilege is what leads the sons of Eli to be scoundrels.

But what does God do?

Therefore the LORD the God of Israel declares: 'I promised that your family and the family of your ancestor should go in and out before me forever'; but now the LORD declares: 'Far be it from me; for those who

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honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be treated with contempt.'

God is capable of changing God's own mind.

Even if it has already been written as Scripture.

The problem for us, of course, is to figure out how to tell if

God has changed God's mind.

The people who argue that women shouldn't be pastors, for instance, are trying to be faithful to God's word, as they read

it. Yet the Presbyterian Church, among others, determined

years ago that God is still speaking to the church and that

God is calling women and men to all ministries in the church.

Perhaps this text is a reminder to us to, as Gracie Allen once said, "never put a period where God has put a comma."

Because if we believe in a living God, then we should be

expecting God to speak to us today. And even though the

Canon of Scripture is closed—meaning there will never be a

new book called, "The Gospel According to Marci" added to

the New Testament—just because the Bible has already been written doesn't mean God can't use it to speak to us today as well. This is not a dead book but a living one.

But notice that in the text Samuel doesn't get to be the one to decide to ignore the laws from Exodus and Leviticus. He never goes to Eli and says, "I'd like to be a priest. I don't care what Leviticus says."

It is, for better and for worse, not our decision.

It is God who decides.

And also notice that God didn't remove the Scripture God was changing. Even though God made Samuel, the non-Levite, into a priest, God didn't erase the chapters of the Torah that prescribed Levitical priests. It was still scripture then. It is still scripture today.

And the problem facing faithful Christians today is how do we know what God has decided?

I will not presume that my answer to that question is the right one. But I will say that we have a responsibility as God's people to be listening for the answer.

William Sloane Coffin, the preacher and social activist I mentioned last week said,

It is a mistake to look to the Bible to close a discussion; the Bible seeks to open one.

So, friends, we need to be in discussion so that we may discern what God is saying to us today. Reading the Bible this year, and building that practice, is one way we participate in the discussion. Coming together in Christian community for study, conversation, worship and fellowship is another way to participate in the discussion.

Breaking cultural practices that encourage us to surround ourselves with people with whom we agree about everything is another part of the discussion. I don't know if you know how rare a community we have here. Some of us are

conservative and some of us are liberal. We come to this place from all different walks of life. And we love each other.

Let's promise to be careful with each other, hearing each other's thoughts, valuing others' opinions. And let's not be like the world around us that only sees value in conversation if it will make the other person change their mind.

Because I truly believe that is how we will know what God is saying to the church. When we truly listen to each other and each others' experience, I trust it will be easier to discern where God is calling us.

And one last thing to note from the text today. Eli's sons didn't just get struck by lightning the minute the messenger from God made the declaration that they were out. It took time. Samuel had to grow up. God's time is not our time. That isn't an excuse to not work for change. But it is a reminder that if things don't happen immediately, that is no reason to stop trying.

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In this text God says, "those who honor me, I will honor". In that, I hear great promise that if we humbly seek God and listen for God, we may become a part of the conversation.

Amen.