

## **“What To Do When the Prophet Singles you out for Judgment?”**

When we were in our worship meeting this week, we laughed at the liturgy and music for today. I think the congregation is going to get this one! It should be pretty simple to see the theme this week! Samuel’s refrain, “Here I am Lord” in the liturgy, and Here I Am again in the choral music and congregational songs. At one point my sermon title was “Here I Am.” The story of Samuel’s calling in the night is a popular one - and it should be.

This is the child who was prayed for by Hannah weeping on the temple steps, offering a song similar to Mary’s song at Jesus birth. This is the infant dedicated to God in the care of the priest, Eli. The young boy sleeping in front of the dimming light of the Lord in the Temple in Shiloh. This is the story of the middle of the night calling where God speaks loudly, clearly to Samuel. This is the boy who has the work of God to do. This is the prophet of great import. This is the man who will usher in the royal monarchy for the people of Israel. This the one who will anoint the first King of Israel, Saul. Yes, this is a popular story and it should be.

But there is another storyline in this passage that is also important to consider. Eli is the foil to Samuel’s character. Without the priest and his family’s downfall, Samuel’s trajectory toward greatness would not be so clear. Without the light gone out for Eli, we wouldn’t see it shine so brightly for Samuel. Without this dereliction of duty, we wouldn’t see all that’s possible for Israel on the horizon.

And yet this character, Eli, and his story, is NOT so popular. I looked and there's no liturgy around Eli's counsel from this passage. There are no hymns helping us join our voices with the old priest's resignation. Nothing that lifts up his dimming light, and the honest speech: Go one, tell me everything that's true even if it hurts me. Eli and his blasphemous family – this is not a popular story.

But maybe it should be. Instead of looking at Samuel in our scripture passage today, the young prophet ready to make his mark, what if we look for faithfulness in the response of the aging priest. Eli, who has made mistakes and whose order of things will be changed. Because Eli models for us a faithful response to a question that is live for us today:

### **What do you do when the prophet singles you out for judgment?**

Eli was the priest at the temple in Shiloh during the era known as the Judges. The period of the judges spanned over 400 years. And it was a bit like the wild, wild, west. The land and its resources were up for grabs. There were threats from indigenous tribes, arrival of newcomers on the coasts, and emerging territorial states. Leadership was local and overlapping. And justice was homegrown and swift. And not particularly righteous – although stories of great courage and faithfulness appear in the Book of Judges. The final line of the book defines this period of instability in Israel's history: "In those days there was no King in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

Eli and his sons are part of this mix. They serve the Temple in Shiloh, the central sanctuary of the Israelites. Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas, are a disaster. They have corrupted the priesthood, taking the fat for themselves from sacrifices offered to the Lord, sleeping with women who wait outside the temples, and in many, additional ways disrespecting the Lord. Eli for his part didn't or couldn't stem the tide of these actions. So, when Samuel received his prophecy from the Lord, Eli gets prepared.

So when the little boy comes back around hesitating to tell the priest the bad news for his family. Eli says, "I know, I know, a prophet is called to deliver hard news. And it is not because you want to but because GOD HAS COMMISSIONED YOU TO TELL THE TRUTH. Let me have it." Eli is bright-eyed and clear headed. No longer fearing what is ahead. Even if the words condemn me, it will be God's vision for the world. I want to hear the dream.

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Matt Skinner in his work for Working Preacher offers this connection on the scripture for congregations on this MLK holiday. He said this, "White churches memories of King are so sanitized. That we would all have been right there with King if he was in our neighborhood."

Well, Matt Skinner is in Minnesota, so if he served in Atlanta, he would really see the truth of this statement. After my 15 years serving churches in Atlanta, I can confidently say that legacy of churches inaction or action during the Civil Rights Movement continues to define their existence today.

And that every church I'm familiar with did powerful and important work, and did terrible hateful things too. I can tell you which stories are publicized in the newsletter and hung on the wall.

This week in Atlanta, there is a Matthew 25 conference. It is a movement of over 1,000 churches – large and small – with three explicit aims: dismantling structural racism, eliminating poverty, and encouraging congregational vitality.

There is none of the usual talk of budgets and declining membership and rules of polity. Instead, we are called to serve Jesus by contributing to the well-being of the most vulnerable in all societies – rural and urban, small and large, young and not-so-young. From affordable housing to community gardens to equitable educational and employment opportunities to healing from addiction and mental illness to enacting policy change – there is not just one way to be a part of the Matthew 25 movement.

Friends, this is a new thing, and this conference is full.

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Eli is ready for confession. You see, even when he is condemned, Eli honors God. Even through his acknowledgment of the truth of who is he, Eli honors God. His confession is not just admission of failure, but when you recognize how you have strayed you honor God and the truth of the Gospel moving forward. In a concluding line so complex and honest, full of pain and suffering yet lined in hope, Eli brings God the glory, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

With honesty and confession, we participate in the God's ministry, with hope in a future that is God because it is in God's hands.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen!