

“Living into the Calling to Which We are Called” based 1 Samuel 3, Ephesians 4
Delivered on January 17, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Today’s text could be a kind of parable for us in our modern age. Eli could represent for us the established church. Eli is, after all, the keeper of God’s word to whom the traditions of God’s people are given. He is in a position of power and his power gives authority to others.

Yet, those whom he has given power, his own sons, have abused their power and made themselves vile. In doing so, they have blasphemed against God. They tied the God of Israel, to their own wickedness. They made God look bad to the people by their deeds.

And so, in the chapter before what we read today, Eli warns his sons about their actions, but they do not listen, and Eli does not remove their authority, and they carry on their deeds. They continue to abuse their authority as religious leaders, making the Lord look bad. And so, God sends a messenger to Eli, who tells him that there are consequences coming. The messenger speaks for God, saying the bigger promises to Eli and Israel remain, but that Eli would lose his power – his arm would be cut off. The arm is a Hebrew metaphor for strength and power. He is told that his sons will be killed, and that the Lord will do something new.

So, rather than carry out against Eli what had been warned and kill his wicked sons right away, the Lord entrusts to Eli a boy named Samuel, who was a miracle baby. You see, his mother Hannah was barren, yet God gave her a son, and she gave the son back to God, dedicating him to serve God. She gave him to live with Eli the priest at Shiloh, to belong to the Lord. Samuel’s parents visit him once a year. In a sense, Samuel is adopted into Eli’s house, but not to become wicked like Eli’s sons. He would hear and speak God’s word.

As we approach nearly a year in the grip of this pandemic, when we see a divided nation, it might be easy for us to identify with a feeling that the Word of the Lord is rare – that things are growing dim and it is difficult to see where the Lord is at work. The number of people in our nation who identify as Christian is declining, yet even among those who identify as Christian, the number of those who attend church is declining faster. It can feel as if the power of the church in Western culture – the arm of the church, its strength – has been cut off.

Perhaps we can learn something from Eli in all of this, because despite how his sons are and the warning of the consequences, Eli remains faithful to God and does not shy away from his responsibility to Samuel. He does not abandon his responsibility to accept and even facilitate the new thing God is doing. When the child Samuel thinks that it is Eli calling him in the night, after the third time, Eli realizes that it is the Lord calling Samuel. Eli knows, because of what the messenger had already told him, that God is calling Samuel with bad news for Eli, and still, Eli tells Samuel to listen for the Lord.

This must have been difficult for Samuel, because when he answers God's call, he hears about the failures and shortcomings of Eli, the man who has raised him. This is the man by whom Samuel has learned teachings about the Lord and ways to serve the Lord. Samuel is hesitant to tell Eli what God has told him, but Eli insists, and Eli accepts what Samuel tells him will happen, saying, "Let the Lord do what seems good to the Lord."

Eli loves the Lord, but the damage is done. There is nothing he can do to atone for his sons. Samuel has spoken the truth to him, in love, and Eli continues to care for Samuel. Notice at the end, that it seems there was some time that passes after this when Samuel grows up, and before the next chapter where Eli's sons are killed and Eli himself dies. In this chapter, Eli's eyes had begun to grow dim and Samuel is still young. In the next chapter, Eli is now blind. He is 98-years-old, and Samuel is ready, fully prepared to take over in a crisis that begins with the ark of the covenant, the very presence of God being stolen from Israel.

Eli in this story, accepts that God has a new plan, and that plan begins with Samuel. Eli does not abandon God nor does it seem as if he feels as though God abandoned him. And God's judgement is not to abandon or condemn Eli, but to fix what is broken. Ultimately, what God starts with Samuel, God carries through in Jesus. You see, Samuel will later in this story anoint King David, and it is as David's descendant that God entered the world, to be the anointed King, or Messiah, or the Christ, to live as we live, sharing in our humanity, even to the point of death on a cross, only to rise again to share God's life with us, a life in community, bound by love, that is, both abundant and eternal.

We may feel as if the Word of the Lord is not with us in our darkest times, but the truth is that the Word of the Lord is with us. God is with us. That is the gospel. That is the good news of Jesus Christ. It can be hard to accept that there is an ever-present God because we see evil around us, but it can be harder to accept it because of the sin and evil within us. You see, if we as Christians, truly lived as if we believed God were with us, then we would know the Word of God as active in our lives even in the darkest times. It would be harder to sin if we took the notion seriously, that the presence of God is with us and even within us.

But we are broken human beings and it is hard to stay focused. We like to keep God at a distance to hide our sins and maybe think that outward actions of piety and religiosity might atone, or make up for, the internal struggles we have with false idols. These are the things we value more than God – like our comfort, wealth, power, popularity. And then we like to make excuses to justify ourselves how we value these, as if the world's notions of comfort, wealth, power and popularity, and many other false idols, are things we seek for the Kingdom of God.

Friends, I like to be comfortable. Who doesn't want wealth, power and popularity? Who doesn't think as Christians that they can use these for good? But the truth is that these things too often can get in the way of our calling. We start to think not that these are tools God has given us to

do good in this world, but that these are signs of our living out our calling correctly. We think that God will bless us with these things if we are faithful, and when we serve God we will be comfortable, wealthy, powerful and popular. It's not that these are inherently bad or evil, but if our faith is based on having these things, or we pursue these things with ambition that does not have regard for the welfare of others, then they are idols before our God, who calls us to self-giving love.

But here's the thing you must remember. You have a calling in your life. Just as Eli did and just as Samuel did. Just as any of us has a calling. Yes, God is calling you. This does not mean that you will see evidence of God's call in your prosperity. It does not mean that you will see evidence of God's call in your moral perfection. It does not mean that you will see evidence of God's call in your outward works. Your calling is to love and serve your God with a self-giving love, by which whatever it is that you do is part of God's glory. It reveals the Kingdom of God for others to see, that they might also find their calling.

You may be called to be a pastor, but more likely to be a plumber or software engineer, or grocery clerk. Maybe a stay-at-home parent or a work-from-home consultant, a teacher or a doctor, any number of callings. In whatever your profession or vocation, your calling is to serve God through it. Even if it seems like there is darkness, even if it seems like there is change all around us, we must not be like Eli's sons and make God look bad before others. The church must not look the other way as people fall away, because of the bad representations of God in our culture when the world sees the church worshiping idols, in how it seeks comfort, wealth and power, how it seeks even popularity.

Friends, I want to tie this all together with the words of the Apostle Paul. Because you see, in preaching the good news of 'God with us,' Paul guided the early church to understand that Jesus has atoned for us. There is no grand act to bring us close to God on our own terms, nothing to earn God's favor to prosper by the world's standards. So, in light of this, we must consider what he said about our response and what we must hold true.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he was writing from prison at a time when some questioned him. You see they questioned whether he was truly from God, if God let him be imprisoned. How could you be doing what God wanted you to do if you are stuck in a jail cell? Clearly, God is not blessing you, was the thought of his critics. And so, the Apostle penned these beautiful words in his letter, that I will go through now, expanding on them to tie them in.

Paul said, *'I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.'* Notice the calling to which you are called is not seen in the power you have over others. It's not seen in the wealth that you have before others, and not seen in your popularity over others. It is seen in your

humility and gentleness, patience and bearing with one another in love, which I think of as empathy. It is seen in our making every effort to maintain unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace.

Paul goes on, *'There is one body – the church – and one Spirit – the Holy Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.'* Notice the Trinity. One Spirit, one Father, one Lord, referring to Jesus, but One God. This matters.

Paul adds, *'But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore, it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people."* Friends we are held captive by sin and death, but it is in Jesus's death, resurrection and ascension that sin and death are shown to have no power anymore. This captivity is itself captive to the truth.

Notice Paul then clarifies, *'When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?'* This is Paul making sure the Ephesian church knows that Jesus, their brother, a human like them in every limitation, is also fully One with God, for He first descended to us before he could ascend for us.

Paul says, *'He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things. He is 'God with us' even now. "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles – sent out – some prophets – called to speak truth to power – some evangelists – called to spread this good news – some pastors – called to shepherd flocks – and teachers – to make sure others know these truths – to equip the saints – all who are set aside for God – for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.'*

That is until all of us learn enough to realize just how amazing this Jesus is. I say this and want to call this out especially in these difficult times. *'We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.'*

Friends, there are a lot of important teachings in the church and teachings that we draw from our faith and study of scripture. That is what a doctrine is. But we cannot be tossed to and fro by every one of them, to where we think that if this person agrees with whatever I think on this doctrine then they are a true Christian. I will side with them, but if they fall away from that, I will go over there and find someone else.

No, our unity is in the core doctrine that Paul set out before. It is the Trinity, who God is, and it is in Jesus, what God did for us in Christ. It is seen in our calling to gentleness, patience, humility and bearing with one another in love, in the Spirit of unity and the bond of peace. There are a

lot of teachings being put forth as 'this is the litmus test of your Christianity!' No. Paul just laid out what that foundation is and notice he says we are not all going to be perfect right away. The point is that we will come to the full knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the full measure of our stature in Christ.

Then in the end, Paul says, *'But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.'*

Paul touches on the language of Psalm 139 of being knit. The church too is knit. We are knit from the beginning and held together as a community. Friends, we must be prepared to speak the truth in love about who Jesus is and what our calling is in response. This is not to scream it at people who do not yet know the Lord, but to make sure our church stays on task. We must be sure the church does not go the way of Eli and let things go rampant. Samuel, when the same thing happens with his sons, listens to God and puts a stop to it. When Saul fails as a King. Samuel puts a stop to it. David is anointed. It is from David that Jesus comes.

Can we be more like Samuel? Not in the total zeal required in his day, but in the way that Paul said – with gentleness, patience and humility, bearing with one another in love, in the bond of unity, to live into the calling to which we are called. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

Samuel 3 Now the boy Samuel ***ministered*** to the LORD before Eli. And the word of the Lord was ***rare*** in those days; there was no ***widespread revelation***. And it came to ***pass*** at that time, while Eli was lying down in his place, and when his eyes had ***begun to grow so dim*** that he could not see, and before the ***lamp*** of God went out in the ***tabernacle*** of the LORD where the ***ark*** of God was, and while Samuel was ***lying*** down, that the LORD called Samuel. And he ***answered***, "Here I am!" So he ***ran to Eli*** and said, "Here I am, for you called me." And Eli said, "I did not call; lie down again." And he went and lay down. Then the LORD called yet again, "Samuel!" Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Eli answered, "I did not call, my son; ***lie*** down again." (Now Samuel did not yet know the ***LORD***, nor was the word of the LORD yet revealed to him.) And the LORD called Samuel again the third ***time***. So he ***arose*** and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you did ***call*** me." Then Eli ***perceived*** that the LORD had called the ***boy***. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and it shall be, if He calls you, that you must say, '***Speak***, LORD, for Your servant hears.'" So ***Samuel*** went and lay down in his ***place***. Now the LORD came and ***stood*** and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel answered, "Speak, for Your ***servant*** hears." Then the LORD said to Samuel: "***Behold***, I will do something in ***Israel*** at which both ears of everyone who hears it will ***tingle***. In that ***day*** I will ***perform*** against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them. And therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever." So Samuel ***lay*** down until morning, and opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell Eli the vision. Then Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my ***son!***" He answered, "Here I am." And Eli said, "What is the ***word*** that the LORD spoke to you? Please do not hide it from me. ***God*** do so to you, and more also, if you hide anything from me of all the things that He said to you." Then Samuel told him everything, and hid nothing from him. And Eli said, "It is the LORD. Let Him do what seems good to Him." So Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel had been established as a prophet of the LORD. Then the LORD appeared again in Shiloh. For the LORD ***revealed*** Himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD."