

## Listening and Seeing

Our readings this morning from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospels are what are frequently termed call narratives. They are passages which tell us about God's calling out someone from the collection of human beings available and giving them a specific purpose or role in the plan to establish God's own rule among us. In the Hebrew Scriptures, these calls are often found to have a certain formulaic pattern: God speaks to a selected individual. God's voice is heard by them but the task is not immediately accepted, usually because the one selected feels unworthy. God is persistent. God doesn't take no for an answer and the person does answer the call. Then God promises to be present with them as they go about God's business. Not all call narratives contain all of these elements, but most will have several of them. The subject of calls by God is a prominent one among those who attend seminary as we seek to discern the nature of the call God is placing upon us. So these passages are often discussed. The concept of being a called people is also fundamental in the history of the Jewish nation as well as among those who follow Christ. I have formed a pattern since graduating from Seminary which sees me returning often to continue studying there as an auditor of offered courses. This term, which began yesterday, I am revisiting a course which I took as a student. The title of the course is named "Preaching from the Prophets." On Saturdays, the Seminary holds a worship service at noon. Yesterday the speaker for the service used the lectionary selections for today as the basis of his sermon. Between that sermon and the content of the first class, I was reminded of what scripture means when it speaks of being called by God to God's service. Despite our frequent use of the word prophet as being related to predicting future events—that is not what scripture tells us was the role of prophets. A prophet was also frequently called "a man of God" and their role is usually framed in terms of bringing a message or word from God. The prophet was called to speak truth to power. Despite often declaring that God calls us, our tendency is to associate God's call with a formal role in ministry. Yet our theology declares that we have been called and sent into the world to bear the message of God. Both call and prophet are terms that seem to have lost the deeper connection to what God desires especially in the context of God's call upon all of us as claimed children. In the period of today's reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel, those people who entered the Promised Land are still living and acting much like their ancestors did in the wilderness—still failing to understand and live into their covenant relationship with God. They are not yet a nation, but rather a loose affiliation of tribes with a common ancestry who are still operating under the leadership of judges whom God raises up to lead the people in difficult times. Samuel is born in a tumultuous time. He has been dedicated to God's service by his mother Hannah. At a young age he is taken to the central Israelite shrine at Shiloh where the Ark of the Covenant has been placed. There he begins learning about the duties of being in the Lord's service in the presence of Eli, the priest there. In the passages preceding today's reading we learn that what is happening at Shiloh is not pleasing to God. As Eli ages, his two sons who are termed scoundrels are taking bribes and violating the offerings given by the people instead of performing their priestly duties in accordance with the law. They are doing what is right in their own eyes, not God's. This brings us to the opening of our passage describing the situation as Samuel is there learning how to minister to the Lord under Eli. "The word of the Lord was rare

in those days; visions were not widespread.” This particular verse seemed to jump out at me as I read this passage. I thought how this description is like our days—it seems as the loudest voices in our society are those promoting greed, spreading hatred, using words and terms which deny respect and dignity to others—the word of the Lord is often lost amid this cacophony. The vision of community where what binds people together is a mutual love and caring which is inclusive of all God’s people seems to be dim and getting dimmer in our time, like Eli’s sight. Our Scripture connects the rarity of the Lord’s word to the people, the scarcity of visions, with the dimming of Eli’s eyesight. The inference is that it is not Eli’s age which is the issue. In contrast to Eli’s failing eyesight, Moses’ sight which remained fixed on God’s will remained excellent until his death. But Eli has allowed sin to continue in the actions of his sons within the Lord’s shrine as they acted as priests to the people. This acceptance of sin has caused the loss of his ability to see the vision the Lord has for the people; he no longer can hear God speaking to him. Both of these verses contain phrases not found anywhere else in Hebrew Scripture. So it is important to carefully examine them. The adjective translated as rare also means precious and is typically applied to something like jewelry. It is applied here to convey the concept of something that is extremely valuable due to pure lack of supply. Yet we must be careful not to consider this rarity of the word or the visions as being isolated from the information about Eli’s dimming eyesight. These two things are intimately connected, entwined as it were—God still speaks, but the listening and seeing ability of Eli has been impaired so significantly that he does not receive the word he is to give to the people; a word which means his sons and others are held accountable for their deeds and can no longer do what is right in own their sight, but are called to do what is right in God’s sight. We know that God is still speaking because as learn that as Samuel has lain down for the night near the Ark of the Covenant, he hears the Lord’s voice calling his name. Although Samuel has spent some time ministering to the Lord under Eli, this is his first personal encounter with God so he does not recognize what is happening. He assumes any voice he hears must be Eli’s. The sequence of events which follow are very familiar—Upon hearing his name, Samuel jumps up and goes into Eli saying, “Here I am, for you called me.” Eli knows he hasn’t called Samuel, so he tells him to go back and lie down. This happens twice because Samuel hearing a voice in the night assumes it must be Eli calling him to come to him for some reason. The third time the Lord calls out Samuel’s name when Samuel goes into Eli, Eli figures out what is happening. Eli still hasn’t heard the Lord’s voice calling, but he perceives that it must be the Lord who is calling the boy. Eli understands that the Lord is speaking, just not to him. Eli then instructs Samuel to again go lie down, but to respond differently if he hears the voice calling his name again. The response Eli gives him to say is: “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” Samuel, although initially confused about the source of the voice he is hearing is immediately responsive to the voice—running into Eli’s room anxious to be of service to his mentor. It is interesting to note what Samuel is told to respond and what he obediently uses as his response to the Lord is different. It is not Here, I am for you have called me, but speak Lord, for your servant is listening. Answering God’s call depends upon being willing to hear what God’s message, God’s call is. There are many voices which compete for our attention as we go about our daily activities—as we make our choices many of them seemingly routine. How many of us can say that we are actively seeking God’s word about these choices? How many of us can say that we really know

God well enough to recognize a word as being from God or someone else—because not everyone who invokes God’s name is actually bearing a word from God. Think of Eli’s sons in this narrative who were serving in the Shiloh shrine but who allowed their own appetites to abuse their power, give insult to the Lord and put their own needs about the needs of the people they were to serve. The conditions which are described in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel are not that different from those around us today. The poor and powerless are still at the mercy of the strong. Human appetites still destroy lives and livelihoods. There is one thing we can know for sure. The overwhelming witness of the prophets is that God has no tolerance for those who prey on the weak, who abuse their power, or who eat their fill while others are hungry. Perhaps the difficulty embedded in this passage is how easily it can apply to us. We do not usually think of ourselves as being powerful, especially as individuals. The task of the church is not that different from that of the prophet—we are called into God’s service to cry out against injustice and the abuse of power in the world. Another point to be gleaned from this passage is about the first message Samuel received from the Lord. It was neither pretty nor easy. What Samuel hears is a brutal condemnation of his mentor Eli. Just as the people’s receiving of the covenant did not lead them did not guarantee a life of perfection, neither does God’s call to serve. God’s words to Samuel were hard to hear and even harder to speak to Eli for they involved judgment against Eli’s own children. God’s call to serve him often involves working to change human beings and their systems that are broken. This is never an easy path. The role of the prophet, the role of God’s called children is to speak truth to power; to hear and respond with humility to the message of judgment that challenges our own practices—our own participation in systems that deny respect and dignity to others. This weekend is a holiday weekend which marks the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. King’s activities as a civil rights leader were not popular to say the least, yet he felt called by God to stand up and speak truth to power. One of his most famous speeches was at the March to Washington where he declared that he had a dream. Desmond Tutu, a leader against apartheid in South Africa declared that God has a dream. In both of these men we see a vision of a world where all people are living in community and sharing in God’s abundance—hatred and greed, violence and war are no more. This vision is much like that found in Isaiah which is called the peaceable kingdom. The call to the church of Christ, the call to all God’s children is to work to make this dream a reality—to realize the dream as some banners in the Charlotte parade yesterday read. The church is called not to place this vision in eschatological terms of only coming at the end of time, but to stand up and speak truth—even uncomfortable truth—to our government, to our community, to our neighbors and yes, even to ourselves that God has a dream which should be ours. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.