

Dimmed Vision

I suppose it might be my recent experience with cataract surgery which led me to think about the opening verses of this passage from Hebrew Scripture; to focus on that more than the traditional emphasis which is usually on the call of the Lord to the young Samuel who served the priest Eli. The reason I sought to have the cataracts removed was because I had issues driving at night. The glare of headlights made it difficult if not impossible to see where I was going. Although others had spoken to me of the differences in how colors looked to them, I thought that was not an issue for me. When asked about colors being different after the first surgery, I made a remark to Dr. Handler to that effect; that there was no difference. I said whites still looked white to me. He laughed at me and proved me wrong. He wears a white lab coat, and it always appeared white to me. He then had me look at it through only the eye which still had a cataract, then use that device to look through an opening through which I could only use the eye from which the cataract had been removed. His lab coat still appeared white, but the intensity of the white was so much greater. Perhaps my vision had not distorted colors in the way others had spoken of, but it had surely been dimmed. And our passage opening seems to connect two thoughts—both of which involved seeing. When you include the entire passage of twenty verses of this text about this event, it encompasses not only Samuels call, but the details of how that call was conveyed, and the circumstances around it. Samuel is a young boy when this happens, the chief priest is an elderly Eli who has two adult sons whose behavior plays a role in the call Samuel receives. These twenty verses contain the information that God speaks directly to Samuel, but this is Samuel's first conversation with God and he does not recognize who is calling his name. Within these verses, although Samuel hears the voice, he thinks it must be Eli calling and he responds immediately. It takes a third time of Samuel going to Eli for Eli to recognize that Samuel is hearing the Lord's voice. Eli then instructs Samuel how to respond. The conversation which then occurs is about Eli and his sons and their failures as true Levites in the service of the Lord and Eli's failures to intervene, to restrain their behavior. They were blaspheming God. In other passages we are told they were corrupt in other ways, so God has decided to replace them. The last two verses tell us: "As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. What happens if we go back and focus on those first two verses: "Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room." The details of these two sentences are significant, especially the phrases "The word of the Lord was rare; visions were not frequent. Both of these phrases do not occur anywhere else in the entire Hebrew Scripture. In biblical Hebrew the descriptor of "rare or precious" is typically reserved

for an item like jewelry; the idea of something extremely valuable due to a pure lack of supply. The earlier chapters in 1st Samuel reveal an anarchic time in Israel both due to the wider political chaos around them and to the activities of Eli's sons. There seems to be little recognition or recording of a word from God. The question for us is to examine whether it was the word of the Lord which had become rare or was it that those who should have been attentively listening were not. From the earlier portion of the text we know that Eli is old, but what is stated here is that his eyes have grown dim. Eyesight is often connected not only to physical seeing but to other aspects of the individual whose story is being told. In Genesis dim eyesight refers to a weakened Isaac while the aged Moses had excellent sight even as he died. The lack of vision by Eli reveals a hopeless social state in Israel. There is a connection between failure to listen for God's word and being able to have vision. As we considered the mystery of the Trinity last week and talked about the importance of numbers in Biblical texts, we again have the number three before us. Three times God spoke to Samuel and three times Samuel ran to Eli before Eli understood that God was speaking to Samuel. This seems to indicate that the word of the Lord was not really so rare as much as it wasn't being heard. As we look around the events of our world, do we have the same issues that were present in ancient Israel? The text from Mark's gospel in some ways is about the same issues. God's words are not really being heard. The Pharisees in Mark are on the lookout for ways to ensnare Jesus, to catch him breaking the religious rules, to trap and destroy him. The issue isn't really Sabbath laws; the goal is to put a stop to this man whose teachings and actions are disrupting the status quo and upending the systems that keep the current power players in place. The Pharisees and Herodians and many others in positions of power—then and now—do not care, not really, about the man with the withered hand, his suffering, his plight. They are obsessed with maintaining the upper hand—of remaining in control—of keeping their status. When we read and study this text we take a certain view. In seminary we were told to examine the viewpoint from which we read the text—to see where we place ourselves. When we read a text like this one from Mark, where do we place ourselves? It is unlikely that we will place ourselves in the role of the Pharisees or Herodians. We consider ourselves on Jesus' side. Perhaps we do not see ourselves as the man with the withered hand, but we feel compassion for him and his suffering. We would never imagine that we would choose Sabbath adherence over a relief of someone's suffering if the choice was ours to make. Yet how often do we say we follow Jesus' teachings and yet turn our back on God's word to care for the vulnerable, for the alien in our midst out of fear of what their presence may do to our own status. Too often unknowingly we take the role of the Pharisee and are on watch for religious rule breakers rather than on the lookout for the in-breaking of the life-giving reign of God. Too often we are at the ready to protect our advantages even at the expense of other's healing and wholeness. Too often we do whatever it takes to preserve our own advantages while failing to see how our actions handicap others. Of course, in our daily lives the choices

we make are rarely as clearly presented as they are in the text. We may choose not to speak truth to power, but feel that our voice is not one that would be heard anyway. We live in neighborhoods whose values we protect over advocating for low income housing. We choose to live in places where we will not have to engage with those with whom we disagree—preferring separation rather than understanding or reconciliation. “In those days”—in these days—“the word of the Lord was rare” or are we not listening? “Visions were/are not widespread” or is our vision dimmed? Have we developed a type of cataract over the lens through which we view the world so that the vision of the Lord’s alternative reality of abundant life is not seen? If we seek to listen directly to the teachings of the Lord about how we are to live with one another—with neighbor as Christ saw neighbor—then our vision will be clear, not dim. Because the word of the Lord is not rare if we open our eyes and ears so that it may come and reside within us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.