

"Pointers."

1 Sam. 3:1-20; Ps. 139:1-6, 13-18; John 1:43-51  
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church  
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The Bible is messy in a lot of ways. It mixes up judgment and redemption in an untidy combination sometimes. Take Eli, for instance. This priest of Yahweh was pretty much of a failure as a parent. His two sons, Hophni and Phineas came into the "family business" of the priesthood and saw it as just that: a business. They could skim the best off the offerings of the people, they could sleep with the women who came to work at the Temple.

Eli tried to warn them, he tried to restrain them. But to no avail. They were going to do whatever they wanted. They didn't care what their father thought and they also didn't care what God thought. So much for the proverb: "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it".

Was Eli weak, too weak to control his sons? Should someone else have been in charge who had a stronger hand? Perhaps. But, rightly or wrongly, Eli was the priest in charge of the Temple at Shiloh.

Because of a vow she had made, Samuel's mother, Hannah, had given Samuel to Eli to raise him in the Temple.

So Eli, the failed father, is the one to bring up Samuel -- Samuel, who will grow up to become the most important prophet of the Old Testament after Moses. Samuel will be the last of the Judges. He will be the one to anoint King Saul and later King David.

Samuel stands with one foot in the time of the Judges and one foot in the time of the Kings. He provides for the transition of the people of God into a new era in their relationship to the Lord.

Like Eli, we too may think we have blown it in the past. Perhaps we don't feel as though we've been a very good role model for others, not a good parent, not a good teacher or helper of others. Today's text is a good reminder that there's always an opportunity to make a positive impact on someone's life.

In spite of our flaws and our failings, we still can point others to God.

Eli is in the right place at the right time to point Samuel in the right direction. When the voice in the night calls out his name, Samuel assumes it is blind Eli calling for him. Several times it is repeated - - God doesn't give up even though Samuel doesn't know it is the Lord on the line.

Eventually Eli, the blind one, sees clearly what is happening and is able to instruct young Samuel in how to respond to the Lord's summons. Finally, the fourth time God calls, Samuel knows what to do. He is able to listen for God's word.

But what a word it is: A word of doom for Eli and his house. No wonder Samuel lay awake the rest of the night. What do you say about such a message? How do you let your mentor and your master Eli know what you have heard?

Luckily, Eli makes it easy for Samuel to reveal what he has heard. And Eli, for his part, accepts the message and knows it is the Lord's word because it is the same message he himself had heard earlier.

There's no reason why Eli would have confessed to Samuel his family's shame or impending doom before this. For all we can see Samuel treats Eli with deference and respect. So, when Samuel receives this message from the Lord, Eli knows it is truly the Lord's word, and not something Samuel made up.

This word is a signal that a new day is dawning. God is reaching out in a new way and starting afresh with Samuel.

As is often the case, a new day comes at the expense of those currently in power. Eli and his sons will soon be yesterday's news. A new thing is happening.

Many years later, when Jesus calls his disciples, it too is the signal of a new day. His message is good news for the poor and the outcast, the downtrodden and the marginalized. It is a bad news message for those who oppress the poor and wield power unjustly.

John the Baptist knew that he must decrease while Jesus must increase. It was not because John's message was not valid or because he had not pleased the Lord. It's just that a new day was breaking and the Son of Man was on the rise and John was able to point to him and tell everyone that God's promises were coming to fulfillment in Jesus.

Today's scriptures are about the call of God. It comes to Eli, to Samuel, to Peter and Andrew, to Philip and Nathaniel... to you and to me. Sometimes we stand in the role of Eli and of John, guiding and pointing to the One whose word makes our ears tingle and makes our hearts skip a beat.

Sometimes we stand like Samuel or Nathaniel - - not sure who is calling out to us. Sometimes we think the call is always for someone else, not for us.

But, my friends, someone is calling your name. Someone has been calling to you since before you were born, trying to get your attention, hoping you will hear and understand and share the message too.

We aren't called because we are such good folks. We aren't called because we possess extraordinary powers. We are called because God chooses to exercise God's sovereign will in reaching out to us and gathering us in.

You may be like Samuel in the night: God has been calling out to you but you haven't recognized the voice or understood where it was coming from. You may need an Eli, someone to help you understand that the message is for you, someone who is willing to guide and point you in the right direction.

Isn't it interesting that Eli doesn't dismiss Samuel's call, he doesn't deny it. He simply receives it and believes it. With this story, Samuel is headed down a path of vocation - of calling, as a servant of the Lord.

You may be like Nathaniel: pooh-poohing others who have tried to point you on the path toward God, refusing to give up the road you are on for the sake of a higher calling. Hopefully you've had someone like Philip who didn't get defensive, didn't get angry, he just got up the courage to reply: "Come and See" and he pointed the way to new life for Nathaniel.

Calls to Christian vocation continue throughout our lives. The number of people who play the role of "pointers" for us are legion.

Along with Samuel and Philip and Nathaniel and you and me there are many who have responded to the call and the claims of Christ and have decided to live in response to the life of the Man from Nazareth.

One such person is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was one who heard the voice of God calling him to a particular kind of ministry. It was a difficult call, a dangerous call. It was a call that put him in direct confrontation with the Eli's of his day, leading him to preach bad news to the status quo so that good news might be heard.

His was a call that led him to cry out for God's vision of justice, freedom and peace for all God's children.

And even though his calling ultimately led to his death, it didn't come before God was able to use him to preach to the halls of power and to leave clear signposts pointing along the road to freedom. His voice still echoes across this country.

On this historic occasion of the inauguration of Barack Obama we see signs that the trails blazed by Dr. King and others have not so totally overgrown that they cannot still be traveled.

But in spite of the progress toward greater equality and justice that has been made as a result of the hard work and sacrifices of many, the vision still awaits its time. The lion has not lain down with the lamb. Violence continues to plague all levels of our society. Opportunities continue to be presented in anything but an equal way.

With a faltering economy, with fearfulness on the rise, in the face of lost jobs and lost retirement savings and lost futures, with people crying out for help everywhere we turn, clearly this is not the time for the church of Jesus Christ to turn away from anyone.

We don't need a clearer signal or anyone to point us to the path of service. Now is not the time to be like Eli, aware that all is not well, but unwilling to use the power and position we have to change things.

Now is not the time to be like young Samuel, eager to serve but unable to recognize that the voice calling us is the voice of God. Now is not the time to retreat into the cynicism of Nathaniel: skeptical that anything good can come out of Nazareth.

Now is not the time to behave like many who are afraid that if they really listen for God, God will really speak and then they might really have to step up and be counted and be held accountable for their discipleship.

Thankfully, we have responded to God's call, especially as we seek to meet the needs of others. Our generosity is an expression of our calling to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is putting our faith in action as we strive to alleviate the suffering of others and point to the hope we have in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Certainly there is more to do and God is still calling to each of us. God's call will mean something different to each, but if it is grounded in the authentic and reliable word of Scripture and built on love it will also build up our congregation, our community and the people with whom we come in contact day by day.

Thanks be to God!