

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.

² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³ the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. ⁴ Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵ and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶ The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸ The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' " So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." ¹¹ Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. ¹² On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³ For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. . . ."

¹⁵ Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶ But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." ¹⁷ Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. . . ." ¹⁸ So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

¹⁹ As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I have been looking forward to this day for months. Today we start a six-week series about a time and characters you may not be very familiar with, and the nerd in me is excited to explore these scriptures with you. Our first character we're going to discover is Samuel, who is so important he had two books of the Bible named after him! No one else in the Old Testament gets an honor like that! No one! Isaiah could have been split into three parts . . . but it wasn't. I mean, Jesus didn't even get a single book named after him, and Samuel got two!

So, who is this guy? Well, to understand who he is, we have to take a chapter out of the superhero genre and go back to his origin story. We have to understand where he came from.

So, once upon a time there was a woman named Hannah. Our story, 1 Samuel chapter 1, begins with her heartache, her tears, her prayers. Imagine the beginning of this story as being the same as the intro to the Sound of Music. We see through a camera lens, mounted on a helicopter, hovering toward the village of Shiloh. On a hill sits a large building, larger than the others in the village. As we zoom in, we see people coming and going. It's a busy place. But the camera focuses in on Hannah – and we see her - kneeling and shaking at the front steps, tears streaming down her face.

Hannah is a brokenhearted woman. She is married and her husband loves her, but she is being bullied by his other wife because Hannah is unable to have children.

Her life is difficult. The scriptures say she has been refusing to eat. She's inconsolable. And in our scene, she approaches the "house of the Lord" – a building in Shiloh where people worship. This is not the temple in Jerusalem. That is decades away from construction, but this place is a holy place, the location of the ark of the covenant, where people come to make their sacrifices and pray.

Eli, the priest, is sitting at the doorway, enjoying the beautiful weather (I assume). When he sees Hannah bent over, shaking, and mouthing words that he cannot hear, he accuses her of being intoxicated! “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine,” he scolds her.

But she’s not drunk. She’s despairing. She tells Eli that she is crying out to God, and he quickly changes his tune. He blesses her, saying, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.”

And she goes home feeling more hopeful. In due course, she becomes pregnant for the first time and bears a son that she names Schmu-el or Samuel. “Schmu” means hears in Hebrew, and “el” means God. So, Samuel literally means, “God hears me.” God heard her cries. God heard her prayer.

Then, Hannah raises Samuel for about 3 years and brings him back to the “house of the Lord” and says to Eli, the priest, “Remember me? I’m the woman who you thought was drunk while I was crying and praying. This is the son I prayed for, and in thanks to God, I have brought him here and want you to raise him and teach him to be a priest so he can serve the God who heard me.” And Eli took the boy into his home and became a father figure to him.

That’s 1 Samuel chapter 1.

In chapter two, Hannah sings a remarkable song of faith. A song in which God brings justice to the poor and powerless. A song of God’s goodness, and it says she went on to have five more children.

But in the meantime, Eli raises her son. She makes Samuel new clothes and visits him every year, but Eli, the priest, raises Samuel.

And Eli is not like modern Catholic priests who take vows of celibacy. He has biological children of his own; in particular, two sons – Hophni and Phinehas. And we learn, in chapter two, that these young men were trouble.

In verse twelve of chapter two, my translation says, “Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people.” Now, you need to understand that in those days, priests were not individuals from different backgrounds who felt called by God to ministry like clergy today. Back then, it was a family affair. There was a literal family of Israelites, the Levites, who served as priests. Sons of priests became priests. But Eli’s sons were not good priests.

Scripture is very particular about their unethical and abusive behavior. It says they sexually abused the women who worked in the same place that they did. It says they inappropriately took the best portions of meat from the sacrifices made by others. It says they would threaten people who resisted their acts of embezzlement with violence. These were bad characters.

And apparently Eli knew about it and was either turning a blind eye (which is a play on words because he literally had poor eyesight) or he just wouldn’t stop them. And God has had enough. In chapter two, God has sent an unnamed man to Eli to tell him that his sons’ behavior is unacceptable and will be punished. They will not get away with their misdeeds.

And that’s where we pick up today’s story about Samuel’s calling.

In chapter three, Samuel is still a boy. We don’t know how old. The Jewish traditions and teachings suggest that he was about twelve, but that’s just an estimate. He’s old enough to be responsible for opening the doors of the house in the morning and setting things up, but he’s not yet a young man.

And while Eli has cared for him as a mentor/foster parent for many years, now Samuel cares for Eli when needed. While he slept, he heard his name, and he assumed Eli needed something. So, he got up and asked Eli what he needed. Three times. And I get this. I live this nighttime interruption. With a dog, a cat, and three kids in the house and coyotes, bobcats, and woodpeckers in our neighborhood, we don’t often sleep through the night, and we hear voices calling to us while we sleep, and we get up and

check to see who needs a blanket, and who needs water, and who's just dreaming. So, this scripture speaks to me.

But after the third visit of the night, Eli realizes what's happening, and he instructs Samuel to acknowledge God and listen.

And the news is not good. But it's also nothing new. God tells Samuel, the boy, that Eli and his sons are going to be punished because Eli knew what the sons were doing. We already know that. Eli already knows that. So, what God tells Samuel is not news to anyone but Samuel.

But the major test comes in the morning. The pivotal point in this young one's life. The moment that changes everything else that is to come. You see, a prophet is not just someone who hears the voice of God. That's just the first step, the easy part. The part that makes you a prophet is what you do with the words you've heard.

Scripture says, Samuel was "afraid to tell the vision to Eli." Yeah. Of course he was. Nobody wants to tell their mentor and parent-figure, "God's really pissed at you and your sons. It's not a question anymore of *if* God will punish you. It's really more about when at this point."

But even more generally, no one wants to be the bearer of bad news. No one wants to have hard conversations anymore.

We live in a polarized, binary culture, and our young adults are not experienced with or trained to have meaningful dialogue anymore or to risk saying the truth to someone who might not want to hear it. The very thought of it causes anxiety. The truth teller is at risk of retribution, and there are genuine questions about if it's worth it personally.

But we desperately need prophets in our world today, just as much as the people in our scriptures needed to hear them then. We need to listen to those who speak the hard truth, and we need to train truth-tellers.

Friends, I have to give Eli and God credit for the way they trained Samuel. First of all, God had already sent a man to Eli in chapter two to tell him the bad news before Samuel told him in chapter three. Eli knew his fate and had accepted it. And second, Eli seemed to sense Samuel's hesitation, and he called him once the sun was up and said, "Samuel, *my son*, what was it that God told you? Do not hide it from me." And when Samuel shared what he had been told, Eli didn't get defensive and blame his sons. He didn't make excuses. He didn't get angry with Samuel. He took the news and gave Samuel the greatest gift a young prophet could receive. He said "It is the Lord. Let God do what seems good." He accepted Samuel's words and affirmed that they were from God.

With that, Samuel had his first prophetic experience. He heard the voice of God. He listened. And then he spoke that truth to power. At great risk for his own well-being. He bravely said what needed to be said.

And Samuel's reputation grew. The people of Israel recognized him as a prophet. God kept speaking to Samuel, and he kept listening and sharing it with the public. As he got older, he traveled around and heard disputes. The people acknowledged him as a worthy judge. As a young adult, he took over the priestly duties Eli had taught him, leading in prayers and rituals wherever he went.

In chapter seven, Samuel performs an act we still sing about today. He drew water from a well to bless the people there and he raised a stone as a memorial to the events that had happened. He named that stone Ebenezer. And we now sing, "Come, Thou Fount (well water) of Every Blessing" and "here we raise our Ebenezer" to show how far God has helped us come.

We're remembering Samuel's actions as a young prophet, priest, and judge. The young man has a bright future ahead of him. He's got a wonderful reputation. His life is on a path of success, but, in chapter eight, the people of Israel ask him to do something unprecedented. And he has to muster up his courage again and speak words of warning to them, but that's a story for another Sunday – next Sunday in fact.

For now, let us be grateful for this young life that listened to the voice of God and had the courage to share that message with those who needed to hear it. May we be inspired and led to do the same. Amen.