

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Second Sunday after the Epiphany  
Sunday, January 17, 2021**

**“It Is the LORD”  
1 Samuel 3:1-20**

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“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’” (v. 18).

That’s the culmination of the story of Eli: that’s at once the highpoint and the low point of Eli’s story. But what’s happened here? Who is Eli and what does this message mean? The Lectionary picks up near the end of his story, but we need to begin earlier—and listen from where this story begins, not with Eli or with Samuel, but with Hannah. Let me tell you this story again.

Hannah couldn’t have children—and, for her, this was just devastating. Hannah’s husband, Elkanah, he “loved her” (1:5), the story says, and wished that he would be enough for her: “Hannah, why do you weep?” her husband asked. “Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” (1:8). Yet Hannah was inconsolable, partly because Elkanah’s other wife, Penninah—it’s complicated—she mocked Hannah, “provoke[d] her severely, to irritate her” (1:6).

This family traveled yearly to Shiloh, where there was a sanctuary, a temple, for sacrifice and worship. And one year, as Hannah worshipped in her sorrow, we meet Eli, the high priest—who does not make a very impressive entrance into this story: “Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: ‘O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you [...]’ As she continued praying before the LORD,” the story continues, “Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore, Eli thought she was drunk. So, Eli said to her, ‘How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine’” (1:9-11).

With that kind of clumsy entrance, Eli appears oblivious, inept, tactless; yet Hannah responds kind-heartedly, and Eli then offers a kindness of his own, a blessing that lifts the spirits of downcast Hannah: “But Hannah answered, ‘No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD [...], for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.’ Then Eli answered, ‘Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.’ [...] Then [...] [Hannah’s] countenance was sad no longer” (1:15-18).

Hannah—to her joy—became pregnant, and she named her child as an expression of thankfulness for this gift: “In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son,” the story tells us. “She named him Samuel, for she said, ‘I have asked him of the LORD’” (1:20). And Hannah remained committed to fulfilling her vow—the promise she’d made in prayer—to offer Samuel to the service of God. Once her child was weaned and could be left to grow up in the temple, Hannah returned to Shiloh, where we meet Eli again: “and they brought the child to Eli,” the story continues. “And [Hannah] said, ‘Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore, I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD.’ [...] [T]he boy remained to minister to the LORD, in the presence of the priest Eli” (1:25-28).

And—though this part of the story bewilders our contemporary sensibilities, as Hannah and Elkinah basically deposit their young child at the temple—Samuel nonetheless thrives in this setting: “And the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD,” the story tells us, as he “continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the LORD and with the people” (2:21, 26).

Not so, however, for Eli’s own sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who were meanwhile living disastrous lives: Eli’s sons, were “exploitative” (Brueggemann), using their power and position for personal gain, basically seizing for themselves—even “by force” (2:17)—sacrificial offerings brought to the sanctuary. “Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels,” the story tells us bluntly, “they had no regard for the LORD or for the duties of the priests to the people [...]. Thus, the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD; for they treated the offerings of the LORD with contempt” (2:12, 17).

Their father learns of these (and other) offences that Hophni and Phinehas had committed repeatedly, so elderly Eli tries to discipline them: Eli “said to them, ‘Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people. No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear the people of the LORD spreading abroad [...].’ But,” the story tells us, “they would not listen to the voice of their father” (2:22-25).

As with that bumbling introduction, when Eli mistakes Hannah’s prayers for drunken muttering, Eli here comes across as unsuccessful and inept. He’s the high priest, yet he seems to be the last to know what everyone knew, that his sons were abusive and harmful. Maybe he didn’t see—or didn’t want to see—what was going on? We don’t know how things got so bad on his watch, but—here he is—the high priest whose sons abuse the sacrifices and God’s people.

Eli is “inept but not evil,” as one commentator puts it (Brueggemann), but still Eli’s failure to act—his “aversion to act” (Price)—this leads to judgment for him, for his sons, and for his family line. A nameless prophet arrives and announces that Eli has failed to act justly, that he has favoured his sons’ injustice over God; and so, declares the prophet, Eli’s family will nevermore serve as priests but instead will meet with disaster. Eli—well-meaning but bumbling and inept—Eli receives this word of judgment and calamity... And that’s the moment when our Lesson this morning from 1 Samuel begins. In the Word to the Children, I focused on Samuel—but in this

sermon, I've traced Eli's story. And now that we've heard the background, we can see what a remarkable thing Eli does after hearing that prophecy of disaster.

God repeatedly calls Samuel, but Samuel—who “did not yet know the LORD,” as we're told (3:7)—he didn't realize it was God. Yet Eli (eventually) recognizes that God is speaking to Samuel... Now if anyone had reason to evade and avoid a word from the Lord, it was Eli! And he could've done just that! Eli could've tried to thwart God's purposes by misdirecting naïve Samuel: he could have lied, “Yes, Samuel, as a matter of fact, I was calling you...and I'm going to keep calling you intermittently throughout the night, so—you know what? —just plug your ears and go to sleep.”

Yet instead, Eli opens himself up to hear the word—he exposes himself to the word of God—by instructing Samuel on how to listen for God: “Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening”’” (3:9). Samuel follows Eli's instructions, and hears a confirmation of the prophecy of disaster spoken before by that nameless prophet: “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. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end’” (3:11-12).

Young Samuel, not surprisingly, hesitates to deliver this message to his mentor: “Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD,” we hear. “Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli” (3:15). However, Eli insists that Samuel tell him everything! You might think, “Well, maybe Eli was looking for an out; maybe he was hoping that the word to Samuel would contradict the word from that stranger and absolve Eli.” But the text won't support that reading, because—if you listen closely—Eli pre-emptively threatens Samuel with the content of the message (which, if he were expecting a word of comfort, wouldn't make any sense): “Eli called Samuel and said, ‘Samuel, my son. [...] What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God *do so to you* and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you’” (3:16-17).

Eli knows that this will not go well for him; but he also knows that this is a word from the Lord, and Eli—though he may be bumbling and inept—is faithful, and he must hear what God will utter: “Let me hear what God the LORD will speak” (Psalm 85:8). So, Samuel tells him all of it, holding nothing back...and Eli offers an astounding response of faith and trust and obedience to God: “Then he said, ‘It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him’” (3:18). I quoted that at the beginning of the sermon, calling it the highpoint and the low point of Eli's story—and perhaps now you see why. The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes: “When he hears the message, Eli is a model of piety and acquiescence [...]. Eli and Samuel are together in obedience as they had been at the outset. [...] Eli had nurtured Samuel in obedience. Now the two of them stand together to face the hard, powerful will of [the LORD].”

I find it amazing that I'm apparently more bothered by this outcome than Eli. I object, in the words of Brueggemann: “[t]he problem ha[d] been the sons of Eli, not Eli himself!” We may be bothered by this outcome; we may rage at this outcome...but Eli simply trusts in the justice and goodness of God. Many of us are, despite our best efforts, still stuck in a transactional view of

God—still viewing God as a kind of cosmic vending machine who we think, in return for our service, should pay us in blessing. But there's no such error in the faith of Eli, who serves God because God is God and who trusts God because God is God. Eli can praise God even amid calamity. I think of our next hymn, "O God beyond all praising" (which I also requested for my Induction): "and whether our tomorrows be filled with good or ill,/we'll triumph through our sorrows and rise to bless you still:/to marvel at your beauty and glory in your ways,/and make a joyful duty our sacrifice of praise" (Perry). I'm reminded also of Leonard Cohen, in a verse that could have come straight from the mouth of Eli:

I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you  
And even though  
It all went wrong  
I'll stand before the Lord of Song  
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah

The faith of Eli can challenge and encourage. Who do you relate to in this story? Samuel— young, wonderful, impressive Samuel...or Eli—bumbling, obsolete, inept Eli? Yet Eli, even amid calamity and disaster and failure—Eli could stand up, with faith and trust in the God he had served his whole life long—and say a word of faith in God's goodness. May we, in our lives, find ways to share in the faith of Eli, an inept—yet, in the end—profoundly faithful high priest in the service of the Lord. Amen.