

October 15, 2017 –

Call Consciousness: Who Are We When We Answer The Call – Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3

This week, we move into what it means to be aware of the Call of God upon us. Call Consciousness is built upon Creation Consciousness, and what I mean by that is: when we follow God's call, we are also choosing to align ourselves with God's good, relational, creative, resilient, reconciling, abundant Creation which has been spoken into being by a God who knows only those ways of being. And so when we talk about Samuel's call story, which I am sure many of you remember from your Sunday school days, keep what we have spoken of these past weeks in the background. Today, we get a glimpse into the life of Eli the prophet and priest, and his charge, Samuel, who is being trained to be a prophet.

The very first verse of our reading today says, "*The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread*" (1 Sam 3:1). When we say, 'the word of the Lord' in Scripture, I take that to mean 'truth'.

When our story tells us *the word of the Lord was rare*, I think it means that truth-telling was rare – the telling of God's truth was not happening. Or, it is possible that the word of the Lord was being spoken, but no one was listening. No one cares about the truth.

Since Truth and 'The Word of the Lord' are the same thing, let's begin by addressing the question that Pilate asks of Jesus, the most important question: *what is Truth?*

First and foremost, let's begin with Jesus. Jesus says, *I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*. Truth is what we seek in our relationship with God and Christ and the Holy Spirit.

I believe Truth exists in the tensions of paradoxes (*not opposites*):

In the tension between the Material and the Spiritual

In the tension between the One and the Many

In the tension between Faith and Unbelief

In the tension between the Real and the Symbolic

In the tension between the Factual and the Metaphoric.

If you, as a 'truth-teller', drop either side of the paradoxes in which we live, you are twisting things away from the Truth.

I believe Truth is Objective. God has created a real world, and God is an objective reality which exists whether we exist or not. But that objective experience of God and the world God has created is hidden, tied down, bound by our subjective, personal experience.

We cannot know objective truth except from our personal pasts, our personal perceptions, our experience of the culture and the knowledge we either choose to access or only have access to. All of this influences how we understand Objective Truth.

I believe Truth is Progressive. Time moves forward, and God intends a particular future for all of us. This is what I mean by 'progressive'. History trends toward 'fulfillment' or 'completion', as Paul calls it. But progressive Truth is bound by, hidden, and tied down by our understandings of traditions and the past. Sometimes, those traditions foster that progressive truth, freeing people, granting greater love and hope to others; sometimes, the past suppresses and even yanks truth backwards, hiding it in the folds of the past and our insistence on tradition.

And I believe Truth is Transformative. The reason it matters in Samuel's time that the word of the Lord was rare is because God desires change, and nothing was changing in Samuel's time. Or to say it differently, nothing changes without the word of the Lord, without truth. That transformation is tied down, hidden and bound by our desire as a person, family, community, or culture by the desire to stay the same. Sometimes, God transforms things using what is already present, like when the Israelites are in exile. Other times, God changes everything, like with the presence of Jesus in the midst of an unchanging community of faith.

In the tension of the paradoxes of life and faith, God calls us to listen for, proclaim to, and receive the word of the Lord, the Truth, which is known in relationship to Jesus Christ and is Objective, Progressive, and Transformative. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, *We see through a glass darkly; now we know only in part, but one day we will know completely.*

We have chosen to follow a particular truth together – that Jesus Christ is Lord and has risen from the dead. With these truths in our hearts and minds, we live in a time like Samuel's when many people are trying to make true that which is false, and to change words so that bad things seem good, and true things seem false, and wrong things seem right.

Climate change, global warming, is objectively happening, but it is constrained by our subjective, local experience. Any transformation we could make is constrained by our desire to stay the same, and sometimes that desire is really denial.

Gun violence is an objective reality in America. Any progress to deal with violence is constrained by our traditions and what we think that means. Rather than hindering progress, how can our past help us in the discussion?

Racism is real, and objectively measured. People have suffered because of it, and we can still measure the effects of that suffering. The truths of racism are subjectively experienced because of traditions and a desire to stay the same.

How do we apply the truths to these difficult things? This is, in the world of faith, a question prophets ask. This is what the prophets confront with the word of the Lord, the telling of the Truth of God. They are God's truth-tellers. When truth-telling is rare, the people suffer. If the people are not hearing the truth, the word of the Lord, then they are ignorant. What is more, because the mind, a Creation of God, craves truth, the mind will call ignorance truth and thereby subvert all of God's creation into untruth and unbelief. Or to put it another way, if the people cannot love truth, they will love ignorance.

Thomas Brooks, a Puritan theologian in the 1600s, put it this way: *As Satan has his device to destroy gracious souls, so he has his devices to destroy poor ignorant souls, and that sometimes, By drawing them to esteem ignorance, and to neglect, slight, and despise the means of knowledge. Ignorance is the mother of mistake, the cause of trouble, error, and of terror; it is the highway to hell, and it makes a man both a prisoner and a slave to the devil at once. Ignorance unmans a man; it makes a man a beast, yes, makes him more miserable than the beast which perishes.*¹

The truth is a problem for Eli. In 1 Samuel 2, Eli is told by a wandering visitor that his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are ripping off the people who come to sacrifice at the temple of Shiloh.

Eli's sons are corrupt, brutal, and horrible priests. Eli hears the truth and doesn't really listen, and by listen, I mean he doesn't do anything about what he has heard.

But Eli isn't alone. He is simply mirroring what is happening all around him. No one is listening to the word of the Lord, whether it is being spoken or not.

The story of Eli and Samuel is a story of how we learn to love truth and then speak it. Eli knows that a Prophet of God is responsible for training new prophets of God. In the face of his knowledge about his sons and his inaction, Eli still understands what matters most about his position as a steward and priest of the mysteries of God – hearing the truth and guiding others to also hearing the truth.

So let's see how Samuel learns to be a prophet, a truth-teller of the Lord.

In verse 3, we find Samuel *lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was (3:3) There, the lamp of God had not yet gone out.*

¹ Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Desires*. Found at <https://onshouldersofgiants.wordpress.com/2012/05/23/the-love-of-ignorance-is-the-path-to-destruction/>. Accessed 10/14/2017

Even if the word of the Lord is rare, even if people are not listening, there are places where the light of God still has not gone out, where the assurances of the presence of God are still present.

This is where the first lesson happens and it is so self-evident that it is easy to miss, especially if we, like Eli, are overwhelmed by family problems, political issues, or used to not hearing God's word anymore. Eli misses what is going on twice before he understands that the lesson for his student is this simplest of all lessons, which is ***Listen!***

Samuel hears his name in the middle of the night (3:4) and jumps up and runs to his teacher, Eli. "*Here I am, for you called me*", Samuel says, waking his tired, old mentor up. "*No, I didn't call for you. Go back to bed and let me sleep*", Eli says (3:5-6). The same thing happens again, and Samuel goes back to bed, most likely confused at this point. The third time, Eli finally understands what is happening. Samuel does not know the Lord, and therefore does not know it is the Lord calling for him in the night (3:7). Eli steps into his mentorship and tells Samuel to go back to his room, but this time, when he hears the Lord, to say, "*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening*" (3:9).

Listening has, perhaps, always been an art that is on the verge of being lost. Some points in history, though, seem like ages of *not listening*. Clearly, the time of Samuel and Eli was one of those times. It sure appears we are in one now as well.

A quick test to find out if you are really listening or not is, the next time you are in a discussion about difficult things, like gun control, or health care, or the state of the world, or a family problem, when the other person is talking, are you kicking at the dust to get your point in and forming counter-arguments in your mind while the other person is talking? Because if you are doing that, you are not listening.

What does it mean to really listen?

Listening is an act of caring and patience, of waiting and understanding. Really listening may mean your point never gets made, your voice is only one of clarifying questions and assurances that you are in fact listening. It is very hard to do, especially if, like Samuel, the one speaking to you is God.

Which brings us to the second lesson for how to become a prophet of God. If listening is hard, the second lesson can be even more difficult. The message Samuel receives from God is not good news for Eli. The message is that Eli's family has been fired by the Great CEO and Eli's middle management trainee is being promoted to an executive level position in the organization (3:11-14). Samuel's prophetic message is in response to a harsh and difficult reality: Eli's sons have been stealing from the sacrifices to the Temple, taking for themselves that which belongs to God, and turning the temple into a place of threat to others. Eli, knowing this, has done nothing to change it.

So God is firing everybody, and Samuel is the one who is charged with transmitting the message.

In the church, we call the act of ‘truth-telling’ or ‘prophecy’ **proclamation**, which is the second lesson of being a prophet of the Lord: *the message to which you have listened is the truth that must now be proclaimed*. Samuel, for good reason, doesn’t want to do this. Eli, though, for all his family problems, is a good teacher. He knows what it takes to be a prophet. And so, in the morning, Samuel stays in bed, not speaking, not proclaiming, the rare and difficult word of the Lord.

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. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.’* (3:16-17)

God brings that which is in darkness into the light, and Eli knows what Paul knows many, many years later, when Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians:

[The Lord]... will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart (1 Cor 4:5).

And so Samuel, at the urging of his teacher, proclaims to Eli what he has heard in the night, the judgment of God against Eli and his family. To which Eli responds with, “*Yeah, that seems about right.*”

Or as the Bible puts it, “*It is the Lord. Let him do what seems good to him*” (3:18).

This is the third lesson for being a Prophet which Eli models for Samuel. After a prophet **listens to the truth**, and then a prophet **proclaims the truth**, a prophet **receives the truth**. Even though this is a really difficult judgment against Eli and his family, Eli receives the truth of the Lord. He takes it in and says, *Let God do as God will*.

Based on the lessons of Samuel the prophet-in-training, when we think about what it means to be ‘called by the Lord’, to ‘have a calling’, I think this is what it means – that we listen, proclaim and receive the word, the truth, which God has given to us.

Samuel grows in his knowledge and experience of the Lord and in verse 20 is recognized by the community as a “*trustworthy prophet*”. What we know about Samuel, then, is that he

Listens to the Truth. It takes three attempts for God to get through to Samuel. This means that listening is also an act of discernment. We need to know what we are even listening to and for, and that is not always easy. But if God’s truth, the word of the Lord, is something we care about, then we will seek out the lamp that still burns in places where the Lord shows up.

Tells the Truth, which means ‘Proclaiming’. This can be difficult, because when we are called to be a ‘truth-teller’, it means we are not speaking for ourselves, but for the truth of God.

People might not like the truth, which is why we disappear behind the word of God. That, by the way, is the doctrine of Puritan preaching, in a nutshell.

And *Receives the Truth*, which means, like Eli, we accept the proclamation we have heard.

All this is the work of the Prophet, and I would argue, especially in a time when the word and truth of the Lord is rare, or not listened to, in a time when the love of ignorance is strong, Samuel’s work is our work as well – to Listen and Discern, Tell and Proclaim, and Receive and Accept.

I believe each of us are called to learn the lessons of Samuel, the lessons of the Prophets. Prophets are truth tellers, and because we choose to follow The Way, The Truth and The Life in our relationship with Jesus Christ, we are committed to the same things Samuel is committed to – Listening and discerning, telling and proclaiming, receiving and accepting the word of the Lord, the truth.

In a time when people love ignorance more than knowledge, and the word of the Lord is rare, and visions are not happening, remember the lessons of the Prophet Samuel.

Amen.