

“Speak, your servant is listening”

“Here I am!” These words should sound familiar to you. They are the words of Abraham, the words of Moses, and the words of many of the great biblical figures of the Hebrew scriptures. They are words that we hear most often in scenes like the one before us this morning, where God’s voice seems to elicit a response that one might associate with a willing, ready, and undivided servant. In the scene in 1 Samuel 3, we read of the call of this young boy, Samuel. The previous two chapters provide the backdrop for this startling scene. In the earlier chapters of 1 Samuel, we hear the story of Hannah and we hear, if we listen closely and attentive, of her faithfulness. Despite her barrenness, and in response to her crying out, God provides her with the gift of this child. The text highlights Hannah as a central figure in the new thing that God is doing among the people. And Hannah's song functions as a prelude to Samuel’s call by God. Open your hearts and listen to Hannah’s prayer: “My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God; There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God; The bows of the mighty broken, but the feeble gird on strength; The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.” The life of this young boy, Samuel, like so many of the great figures of the Bible, begins and is made possible by a mother’s prayer.

In focus, then, is Hannah and the gift of this young child, Samuel. Her dear boy, Samuel, for whom she had long prayed and for whom she offered up to serve as the truth-telling mouthpiece of God in a time of great corruption. Eli, the priest, going through the motions of ritual and sacrifice for the Lord; Eli, the priest, the preserver of the Word of God, and while the text portrays him in a positive light, his sons are not viewed so positively. Eli’s sons who stood ready to inherit the priesthood of their father are described as “scoundrels” who have “no regard for the Lord or their duties as priests to the people.” They were, we might say, your stereotypical PKs, right? (I hope not!) But seriously, these PK’s were more than scoundrels, they had been exploiting and abusing the local women. And, we are told that these sons were taking the offering out of the treasury, devouring for themselves the sacrifices intended for God. Here we see the abuse of power and we see a challenge here to the idea of inherited ordination. Faithfulness is not hereditary; it is not guaranteed. Eli and his sons had taken the presence of God for granted. They had assumed that the office of the priesthood would simply guarantee the presence of the Lord.

One of the main functions of the priest was to preserve the Ark of the Covenant. Preserved inside the Ark of the Covenant were the 10 commandments on tablets and the staff of Aaron. The Ark was more than a monument for the people of Israel; it was a kind of portable power-center. After its construction by Moses, the Ark was carried by the people during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness; whenever they stopped to camp, it was housed for safe-keeping in the sacred tent, the tabernacle, and eventually in the Temple. For the people of Israel it was not so much an incarnation of God, but a powerful, special intensification of God’s presence.

And yet the text for today begins with the startling words: “The Word of the Lord was rare in those days;” despite the priest’s meticulous protection and preservation of the Ark of the Covenant, the Word of the Lord was rare. God was silent. It is as if the text is saying that God’s Word cannot be guaranteed; nothing can contain God’s presence and nothing can guarantee it. There is no priesthood, no ordination, no tradition, no heritage, no program, no building, no campaign, no program, no church committee, no formula, no image, no song, *nothing* can guarantee the presence of the living God. While God desires to be with us, God remains free in God’s activity. And sometimes, perhaps even quite often, it is precisely the institution of the church that obstructs and obscures the free path of the Word in the world by thinking that God can be controlled and possessed. We, too, must pay attention to this.

And sometimes God is just silent. Sometimes we cannot hear God at all. Sometimes we feel directionless, sometimes we feel purposeless, sometimes we cannot distinguish God from other spirits and other voices. And sometimes we experience complete and utter God abandonment. There are times in each of our lives when we experience what the medieval mystic, John of the Cross, called the “dark night of the soul” in which God seems so distant, so arbitrary, so strange, so cold, so dark to us.

The late singer, Leonard Cohen, so poignantly expressed this “dark night of the soul” in the opening song from his last record, *You Want It Darker*. In his low, rumbling voice, Cohen’s song is a profoundly intimate prayer to God: “If you are the dealer, I’m out of the game / If you are the healer, it means I’m broken and lame / If thine is the glory then mine must be the shame / You want it darker / We kill the flame / Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name / Vilified, crucified, in the human frame / A million candles burning for the help that never came / You want it darker / “Hineni, Hineni, I’m ready, my Lord.” Hineni, Hineni -- these are the Hebrew words that come from the boy, Samuel. Hineni, Hineni, Here I am Lord!

The phrase “You want it darker” could be read as a question, a challenge, or even an accusation against God. But I think, for Cohen, it is more of a simple statement of experience; that is, the words emerge from a place of profound honesty before God, from the experience of brokenness, suffering, and forsakenness. It is marked by the experience of God abandonment and God’s silence. And, yet, the chorus rings out “Hineni, Hineni, I’m ready, my Lord,” which echoes not only the words of Hebrew scriptures, but of Jesus himself in his cry of God-abandonment on the cross: “Why, oh Lord, have you forsaken me?”

But it is within this context, this context of God’s silence and God’s abandonment that the Word of the Lord comes in an unexpected and disruptive way. The Word comes to a young boy, a boy sustained by his mother’s love and his mother’s prayer. And how does he respond? Hineni, Hineni, Here I am! But Samuel does not hear God; three times he thinks it’s Eli. But the fourth time God calls to Samuel, he responds, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And God speaks to Samuel a Word of judgment on Eli. “See I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle.” God pronounces a Word of judgment on Eli’s house for his refusal to restrain and repudiate the corruption and abusive behavior of his sons. God calls Samuel to speak this truth of judgment on Eli and his sons unfaithfulness; it may be difficult for us to hear the harshness of these words and to wrestle with the idea of God punishing people, but given the situation of abuse and corruption we might view this voice of

judgment as an act of *truth-telling* to corrupt power. Samuel, a young boy, is called by God to speak the truth to Eli, to speak the Word of God's judgment, and this Word is powerfully prophetic as it displays a God who is not content to allow the perpetuation of injustice through silence and accommodation. The truth of God breaks through the injustice of Eli's house; it is a Word that offends as it judges, and shatters the abusiveness of an ordained and established power. It doesn't matter that Eli had preserved the stone tablets in the Ark; none of this matters under these conditions of the abuse of power. Eli's house had turned the priesthood into an abusive den of robbers, and God refuses to allow such abuse. Instead, God acts precisely after the pattern of Hannah's prayer: "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up." And it is a young boy who becomes the mouthpiece of the God who "raises up the poor from the dust, lifts the needy from the ash heap" -- here, Samuel, the young boy, borne and sustained by Hannah's prayer, is lifted up and inherits the seat of honor, which is at the same time a Word of judgment.

Think here about the many brave women who have boldly and courageously spoken up about sexual abuse in Mennonite churches, speaking the truth of God's judgment in the face of those who abuse their power, particularly their spiritual power, which is always it seems to me the most dangerous kind of power. The Word of truth that confronts and exposes injustice is at the same time a liberating Word, a Word that affirms the beaten down, the victims of abuse and violence, and calls abusers to account for their sin, for their unfaithfulness, for their corruption. God refuses to stand idly by in the face of such injustice; God refuses to allow the power structures of the church with its ordained priests and pastors, with its graven images and idols, with its sacred traditions, to obstruct the freedom of the Word of truth.

*Hineni, Hineni*, Here I am, Lord, speak your servant is listening. In the context of God's silence, in the context of the experience of God abandonment, God is nevertheless always at work in freedom and in love to raise up the lowly, to raise up even children, to speak the Word of truth that both judges and sets free.