

Sunday, January 18, 2009

Listen for It!

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by Jill Tolbert*

Hundreds of years ago, there lived a man named Eli. We don't know much about Eli—he appears only for a few chapters here in 1st Samuel. But this is a familiar passage, and so Eli is a familiar player in the Biblical narrative.

Eli was serving as priest in the city of Shiloh, what was then the religious capital of Israel. And as tradition would have it, his sons would typically be next in line for the office of priest. However, Eli's sons had become scoundrels, we are told in ch. 2, v. 12. They had lost respect for the office of priest. They had grown stingy, and regularly dishonored not only their father, but all of Israel by their selfish ways. As saddened as Eli was by his sons' behavior, he knew that his family had lost favor with God. God speaks to Eli in chapter 2, beginning with verse 27. "A time is coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your ancestor's family...no one in your family shall ever live to old age...and I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind."

There also lived a young boy named Samuel. Samuel had been promised to God by his mother Hannah before he was even born, and had therefore been serving God under Eli's watch for quite some time. But he was still young. We will read in today's text that Samuel "did not yet know the Lord," that God's word "had not yet been revealed to him." But Samuel was faithful. Samuel loved and trusted Eli, and was being taught by Eli to love and serve God.

As we will soon see, God's new agenda becomes clear to Eli. God's favor is coming to rest not only upon the next generation, but upon a "new house" in this next generation. God's favor, God's call, comes to young Samuel.

Listen as we read a portion of their story...from 1 Samuel, 3:1-20.

1Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

2At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 3the 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. 4Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" 5and 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. 6The 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." 7Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 8The 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. 9Therefore 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.

10Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." 11Then 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. 12On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 13For 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. 14Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." 15Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. 16But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." 17Eli 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." 18So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him." 19As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. 20And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

Ahhh, young Samuel. One minute, he lay on the temple floor, snuggled under the covers, perhaps even asleep. And out of nowhere comes this voice. Upon hearing it, Samuel dutifully got up and went to Eli, as any good student would. "You called for me, Sir?" Eli replied, "No, I did not call you. Go back to bed." So Samuel trudges back to bed, slightly confused. Again, the voice calls, and again Samuel runs to Eli. "Nope, son, not me. Go back to bed." And yet again a third time, until finally old Eli has that a-ha moment. "It must be God calling young Samuel!" So Eli instructs him accordingly on how to respond when he hears this call again.

Samuel is indeed faithful—a dedicated student who is learning the ways of the temple from wise old Eli. But we realize in this narrative that Samuel is unable to discern this call on his own. Was it because he was young, inexperienced? Was it simply because "the word had not yet been revealed to him? Was it because he was in a sleep-induced fog? We don't know. But we do know that three times, God called, and three times, Samuel misunderstood that call to be someone else.

God's call is often misunderstood.

We each have our own ideas of what God is, of what it is that God does. God is wise. God loves. God is sovereign. God judges. God is faithful. God comforts. And while God is, indeed, all of these things and more, why is it so hard for us to remember that God also calls?

Why is it so hard to realize, to recognize, that the God we worship and serve does love, and is faithful, and is wise, but also calls out to us—that the God we worship is a calling God?

I forget it sometimes too. I know that God has called me to particular roles and jobs in my life, and yet I forget it on a daily basis. This notion of calling is not a new thing for God. It is this God that Samuel encounters in today's text. It is this calling God that Eli realizes is speaking to Samuel. It is this calling God that is at work in this narrative.

On January 2nd of this year, over 1000 college students were summoned by this calling God to Montreat-- to learn more about how this God who calls is at work in their lives. There, we gathered together with others--Eagles, Bulldogs, Wildcats, Gamecocks, Seminoles, Yellow Jackets, Volunteers,

Rebels, Hokies, Scotties, Gators, Commodores, and many others, from all over the Southeast. We worshipped alongside other energetic and enthusiastic college students, each of whom were eager to hear and discern how God is calling them to life.

We were surrounded by hundreds of young Christians, sharing their stories of “Outrageous Generosity,” which was the conference theme. We heard Tony Campolo, noted Christian speaker and author, speak of the difference between power and authority.

We listened with rapt attention as Representative John Lewis told his story of responding to God’s call and leading alongside many others in a movement that changed our nation.

I had the privilege of leading a small group discussion as they shared and wrestled with what it meant to “represent Christ well” on their campuses, in this nation, and in this world. I am so very blessed to be able to work with such a promising generation of leaders—not only for our country--in science, medicine, law, and business--but as Christians, leaders in the Body of Christ. It is a huge responsibility, yes, but an honor as well to be ministering with and to college students as they are beginning to find themselves and as they continue developing their own faith identity.

I am grateful for God’s call to me—to ordained ministry, and more specifically, to campus ministry—in this time and in this place. It is an awesome thing to walk alongside this next generation—one so full of energy and excitement for the things that God is calling them to do.

And if I had to narrow it down, I would have to say that the part of my call that I take most seriously—the one that rises above all the rest—is the role that I play as one who walks with and guides them in their discernment of God’s call on their lives.

Most of you know that my husband and I are both second-career clergy. We had a “real life” for twelve years prior to beginning our seminary journey and consequently our ministries. In fact, it was a mere seven years ago this month—in January of 2002—when we turned the proverbial corner and committed to moving to Decatur for seminary. And over the past seven years, I have learned lots. But one thing that stands out is this...I have truly come to hold a deeper respect for and understanding of this calling God that we worship and serve.

You see, this whole business of “calling” is something God has been doing for eons. There are countless stories here in these pages that tell of this calling God speaking to various folks over time. Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah, Isaiah...Mary, Elizabeth, John, Peter, Paul. And just as each of them have unique encounters with this calling God, so I, too, have my own stories about how and when and where God has called me.

But there is a serious problem with this notion of a calling God. You see, I fear that most folks reserve the call of God for people like me—folks who have been “called” into ordained ministry. In seminary, we are often asked to “share our call story.” Ad nauseum. It’s as if we each have only one “call story,” and that the story only exists in the context of our decision to pursue ordained ministry. That is simply not true. God calls into ministry, but more importantly, God calls into LIFE, to abundant, meaningful LIFE. And that is a call that God makes to each and every one of us, each and every day.

We are—each of us, Samuels. We hear a voice, and we misunderstand. God calls to us, and we think it is someone or something else. You see, each of us, each of you sitting here today has been called--called to this place, for this time. We have been called, are being called, to specific tasks in our personal and professional lives in this crazy, mixed-up world. We have been called, are being called to follow—to follow the baby in the manger, Jesus the Christ. We have been called, are being called not simply to believe, but to become disciples.

The call comes, each and every day. Listen for it, my friends. Listen for it and follow. It will not disappoint.

We are, each of us, Eli's as well. You see, this story is not just about Samuel. Eli's role in this call story is crucial. Eli was there...Eli was there to help Samuel hear God's call, to help Samuel listen for it, and to instruct Samuel how to respond. As the host congregation for PCM@Emory, you are Eli for us, supporting us as we listen for God's call for ourselves and each other. You are Eli for others in your life as well, helping others to discern and respond to God's call—your co-workers, your children, your neighbors, your bridge or tennis partners, your friends. Being an Eli for others is a daunting task, yet an amazing privilege.

God is calling us to be both Samuel and Eli—to listen for the call of God. Listen for it! For ourselves and for each other.

And remember...God's call is not a one-time thing. The call of God is ongoing, constant. That's what it means to be in relationship with God—to be in conversation with God.

Like Samuel, we often mistake God's call for the call of the world. But if we surround ourselves with others—others like Eli—who are also listening for God's call, then we are much less likely to miss it. Sure, it might take two or three times before we wake up and realize, "Hey, that just might be God calling me!" But the good news is that God does call, and God continues to call, whether we hear it on God's first attempt, or God's 41st attempt.

Listen for it, my friends. Listen for it and follow it. For it is in following God's call that you will find peace.

Amen.