

1 Samuel 3

“498 Years Later”

This week we are resuming our study of the prophet Samuel. When we left Samuel two weeks ago, he was the offering of a barren mother to her God. Hannah gave up Samuel, gave up the opportunity to shove her rival's words back in her face, gave up her opportunity for a feeling of wholeness so that he could become part of God's plan for wholeness, in the sending of Christ. We will continue to follow Samuel on his journey through life, part of God's plan for the coming salvation, until Advent, when we wait with the entire world for the fulfillment of God's glorious plan.

Where we pick up in the life of Samuel, we are told he is only a boy. The Hebrew word used could mean anything between a newborn to a forty year old man, which drastically influences how we understand this passage, but according to Jewish tradition, Samuel was twelve. He truly is only a boy, still full of wonder and youthful joy. Like any young person, Samuel is searching for his place in the world, searching for where home is. But as a Jew he is also the age when boys became accountable to the Law, when they become responsible for their relationship with the Lord.

The text tells us that Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. In case you have forgotten, Eli is the crotchety old priest at Shiloh, who could not tell the difference between drunkenness and the impassioned pleas of Hannah to her God. Eli has been the caretaker, mentor and parent to Samuel since he was offered to God as a toddler. He has become the only parent that Samuel ever truly had. But for Eli's biological children, we are told in the previous chapter that Eli's sons have done evil against the Lord by treating the offerings to the Lord with

contempt. The old man Eli, tried to stop them, but his sons refused their father's warning, while Eli was not wicked, he was powerless to stop the wickedness of his own sons. Because of their sins, a man of God came to Eli, and told him that his entire family will die young, and only one member of his family will remain at the altar of God, so they could weep and grieve for their family, and all the members of his household will die violent deaths. Eli is told that his life work, his home at Shiloh, his entire family, will be laid bare. It is all diminishing before his eyes, everything is fading away into nothing. The branch which did not bear good fruit is being cut off from God's plan for salvation. Eli's definition of family, of what home is has to change. The Good News the man of God proclaims to Eli is that God will raise up for himself a good and faithful priest, the Lord will call for Himself, Samuel. The boy, Samuel, will be a part of God's plan for the salvation of mankind, forever.

It is easy to look at Eli as the out of touch priest, who is old and bitter, who long ago forgot what grace felt like. The man who lived too long, and is witnessing the destruction of his own house, while he is helpless to do anything about it. The man too old to rebuild, he is Job, without the restoration. But when we take a closer look at Eli and Samuel we see two people without families, without homes. Both are yearning for a sense of home in their lives, from two drastically different points in life. Both alone, searching for a home in the only place left to them, in God's grace. In Eli we see this man, this old man, who took in a child who was not his own, was told that his entire family would be cut off from the grace of God, and yet still he ministers to the Lord. Remarkably, he still takes this boy, even though he is old and tired, worn down by life and mentors him, knowing who he will become. Eli, the old priest musters the strength to be a parent all over again, to raise Samuel, teaching him to minister to the Lord. He cannot simply take go through the motions of ministry waiting for his life to run out, he has to give voice to

God's grace, for the sake of this boy, for the sake of God's salvific work. Eli does this always knowing what is going to happen to his family, because he is able to understand in some sense the role Samuel will have, not only in his life but for his people. He is able to see the grace of God breaking into the world, the salvation of God moving closer. It would be easy to see Eli as this uncomplicated curmudgeon, but his relationship with Samuel is complicated, Samuel stands as both a reminder of the judgment given on his own house and the grace of God breaking into the world. He is the only son he has left, the son who, God will work through to bring about the coming of Christ. And Samuel, this boy who barely knows his parents from their yearly trips to Shiloh, is left watching his mother have other children, being a mother to them, this must have been heart wrenching to watch. The only person he had who never abandoned him, was this old priest, Eli, who taught him to make his home in God's grace even when he feels alone, even when that grace seems lost.

Today, as the sermon title alludes to, is the 498 year anniversary to Martin Luther's infamous hanging of the 95 theses. Today, we marvel at the Gospel pronounced to in the confessional documents written by children of the Reformation. As this Sunday comes around each year we often remember fondly throwing off of the shackles of papal authority. We envision Rome as the old, out of touch priest, with the sons who take advantage of the people of Israel. And the Protestants as the chosen mouthpiece of God's grace, calling out God's words with youthful exuberance. But it was this old out of touch priest, who taught us how to minister to the Lord, it is this old out of touch Church which is the mother, like Samuel, we never had. When Luther took up his 95 grievances against the Church it was a necessity, the Church needs to hear the Gospel again and again, calling to it to be reformed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It needs to hear God's grace calling out of the silence, when the Church seems cut off from the

grace which nourishes it through dark days. It is a tragedy that the Church responded to Luther's call by exiling him, by excommunicating him and creating a group who protested the regime which occupied their home, where they rightly belong. It is a tragedy that the Church has left so many members of the Body of Christ, feeling homeless, and wandering.

So 498 years later those groups of protestors are as varied as can be, spread out over the theological spectrum of beliefs, as alienated from one another as they are from the Church which taught them how to alienate, and with this in view the Reformation was a tragic necessity, or a necessary tragedy. It is a tragedy that Eli's sons treated the offerings of Israel with contempt, just as it is a tragedy that the Roman Church treated the offerings of the people with contempt. It was necessary for God to call Samuel to preach God's word to a world where the word of God was rare, just as it was necessary for Luther and Calvin, to preach the Gospel to a Church which was unable to answer their questions, to a Church where they belonged. It was necessary for them to remind the Church, where our home truly is.

As Samuel lived among people divided into tribal loyalties, with impious priests, he was called to be part of something more glorious than anything he could hope for. So on this day 498 years later, we go forward in hope of a Church more glorious than anything we can imagine, more incredible than anything we can now see. We are propelled forward not by the question what type of Church do we have, which we can answer with so much disappointment and shame, but by the same question which drove Luther and Calvin, what kind of Church do you long for? What type of home do you long for? I long for a Church which is both Reformed and Roman, both Lutheran and Catholic, where all of the members of Christ's body are one, as the Son and the Father are one. I long for a Church which is able proclaim the Gospel into a world where God's word is rare. I long for a home, where the Body is truly one, where God's grace continues

to reform our life together. So as those who are in the strange and complicated relationship with the old priest, the Old Church, listen for God's calling to each of us, with Samuel, as we participate in God's incredible mission. Let us continue to be called home together, restored, renewed and reformed in God's grace.

Returning to our text, which enlightens our worship today, and guides us in God's grace, we return to Samuel and Eli searching, yearning for a home. We are told in the text, that Eli's sight had grown dim and he could no longer see. Eli has raised this helpless child, mentoring him into who he would become, and now when he is still only a child, Samuel becomes the sight of this old priest who is rapidly diminishing. Eli is laying down in his room, and Samuel is in the temple of the Lord with the Ark of the Covenant. Samuel heard the Lord call out to him "Samuel, Samuel", so he got up and ran to Eli, believing his master was calling him. We can imagine that Samuel would have been used to this, that as time went on, and Eli's sight grew dimmer and dimmer, that he would need Samuel's help more and more. We can imagine that as time went on Eli needed Samuel to help him not only in ministry, but in simple daily tasks that he could no longer do for himself. Without any children left to care for the needs of pitiable old Eli, the only one left is Samuel. Samuel is the only one left, caring for the old man, the only family he has ever truly had, in the temple which is the only home he has known. So, Samuel thinking he heard Eli calling, dutifully ran to his master, and announced his presence to Eli, who would no longer be able to see him enter. Eli, the tired old priest, told him that he had not called to the boy and told him to go back to sleep. Like a tired parent to a child who is far too excited that early in the morning, Eli tells the boy just to go back to bed. So Samuel, did as Eli said and he went to lie down again, but again he heard a voice call out "Samuel", so again Samuel went running to Eli and said "Here I am, for you called me". So again, the old blind priest said to

Samuel “I did not call, my son; lie down again”. This time, you can hear the love in Eli’s voice, as he calls Samuel his son. This time you can hear the care that he still has for the boy even as his health fades.

The text tells us that Samuel did not yet know the Lord, so even when the Lord was calling to him, Samuel could not recognize the voice. Samuel knew he was being called but he could not recognize who was calling him. Samuel is now at the age where he becomes personally responsible for his relationship with his God, who he has been ministering to for years, and he is unable to understand who is calling to him, he is unable to have the personal relationship he is meant to have with God. He is unable to be voice of God’s grace to the world, the role he was intended to have since his birth. He keeps believing that it is the old priest calling out to him in need, instead of his God, calling him to be the servant he was meant to be from birth. To be the servant able to restore his people to God, torn from God’s word by impious priest.

So when the Lord called to Samuel a third time, he again went running to Eli, announcing his presence. But this time, Eli realized that it was the Lord calling to the boy, so he instructed Samuel “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening’”. This is the last lesson Eli can give to Samuel, this is the last time that Eli will be his instructor. So Samuel went and lied down. We are told that the Lord came and stood there, and called out as before “Samuel, Samuel”. And this time Samuel answered, “Speak, for your servant is listening”. And 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”, God is announcing to this child, that he is about to act in Israel, that he is about to act in the land where God’s word has not been heard, where visions are rare, to a land filled with priests who are either old and ineffectual, or wicked and contemptuous, God is about to act, God is about to work his salvation in a world, a salvation

which makes the ears of those who hear about it tingle. The first part of this action is to fulfill the prophesy spoken against the house of Eli.

After the Lord announced this to Samuel, the text tells us that Samuel laid there until morning. We can imagine all of the emotions that he felt, overwhelmed by the presence and word of God, excited for God to act which will make both ears tingle, and grieving for the family of the only parent he has ever had. Upon hearing this word from God, his heart must have sank, he must have wished that it never happened. When morning came, he opened the doors to temple, as he had probably done a thousand times before, afraid to tell Eli about his vision. Out of the love he had for his adopted father, he wanted to leave the word he had received, unspoken. He wanted to pretend like he had never heard it, but Eli asked Samuel what the Lord told him. Eli would not let Samuel hide the word of God, even the words which were hard. So Samuel told Eli everything and did not hide even one dark detail. And Eli responds by simply saying, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him", he resigns himself even now to finding his home in God's grace, in what seems good to God, even when it is hard.

The text concludes by skipping ahead in Samuel's life, we are told that as Samuel grew the Lord was with him, and let none of his words fall to the ground. Samuel grew up, in the grace and presence of God, finding his home not with his mother and father, not even with the old priest, but with God, where our home was always meant to be. There is no mention of Eli, not because Samuel has outgrown his old mentor, but because in God's grace Samuel found his home. He has found his home, away from all the brokenness and abandonment he has experienced and rests on God's unshakeable grace. He spoke the word of God's grace to his people, so that they could all find their home in God's grace, which was about to act in the world. Samuel, who like so many of us was searching for home, did not have to leave Shiloh to

find his home in God's grace, we are told that he remained in Shiloh, hearing God's word. Like Samuel, many of us never leave where we grew up, but for years we can still be left wandering for a home, lost in a place we have always been. Always searching for the place where we belong, the place where God intended us to be, even if we live our entire lives in the same town. Always searching for the home we were meant to have, yearning for something beyond the home we have. As the great great great grandchildren of the Reformation, which called us to our home in grace, we too often find ourselves still wandering. Going from place to place throughout the years searching for a place to call home. We do not need to return to Rome to find our way home, but as the Body of Christ moves forward, 498 years later, we continue to find our home together, with all the members of this Body, in the grace of God, awaiting the coming kingdom, our true home. We continue to find our home in the Gospel hope, which calls and gathers us together around the work of our Savior. This is most certainly true!