

GOD SPEAKS

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Series B)

January 17, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The Old Testament lesson for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany comes from 1 Samuel, chapter 3, verses 1 through 20. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From 1 Samuel 3, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.

² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. ³ The 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.

⁴ Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵ and 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.

⁶ And the LORD called again, "Samuel!" and Samuel arose 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."

⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

⁸ And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears." ¹¹ Then the LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. ¹² On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³ And I declare to 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. ¹⁴ Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever."

¹⁵ Samuel lay until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. And Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶ But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." And he said, "Here I am." ¹⁷ And 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." ¹⁸ So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, "It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him."

¹⁹ And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD.

GOD SPEAKS (1 Samuel 3:1-20)

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

God punishes sin. And God speaks. These are the two basic actions of God that we see in this text. God punishes sin. And God speaks. Whenever we're reading the Bible, we want to look for what it teaches about God. That might be obvious to you. It should be obvious. But sometimes we slip into a different assumption. Instead of seeing the Bible as a book about God, we slip into thinking it's a book about how to please God. In this way, it actually becomes a book about us. But that's not what the Bible is. It's not a book about us. It's not a manual of how to please God. It's a book about God.

So when we're reading the Bible, a good and simple question to ask of the text is, "What does this teach about God?" Too often, Christians ask different questions. We ask, "What does this say to me?" This is an unnecessary question, because whatever the Bible says about God is what the Bible says to you. There's no reason to even ask that question. But the question, "What does this say to me?" comes from a silly postmodern idea that the meaning of a text lies not in what the author means, but in how the reader understands it. This is absurd, and it's an awful way to read a book—any book, but especially the Bible. Even among Christians who try to resist postmodernism, this silly idea has found a backdoor or a window to sneak in somewhere. And we didn't put up much resistance. We kind of want the Bible to be about us. We want it to be a manual of how we can please God. So we ask, "What does this mean to me?" and, "What is this telling me to do?"

Much Old Testament preaching and teaching, especially, has gone down this track. The Old Testament gets treated as a bunch of moral examples, so a preacher would use this text to teach us how to be like Samuel. But that's not what it's about. It's about God.

Now there are, of course, things that God wants us to do. And these things are recorded in the Scriptures. But God usually has a very specific way of showing us when something is about us. He says something like, "Thou shalt ..." That's a good indication that this part of the text is about what we should do. But otherwise, like when we're reading a historical account from 1 Samuel, we should read the text as if it is simply about God, because it is. And we let the text speak for itself. If we ask any question of the text, it should be something like, "What does this teach about God?"

And when we ask that question of this text, we get two basic answers. First, God punishes sin. And second, God speaks.

We'll explore that a little later, but first we should figure out who this Samuel kid is.

This takes place during the period of the judges. There was a period from about 1380 to 1048 BC when Israel was governed by judges instead of kings. After the Exodus from Egypt, Moses led the people for forty years in the wilderness. Then Moses died just before they entered the Promised Land, so Joshua, Moses' assistant, led them into the Promised Land. From the time Joshua died in about 1380 BC until Saul was anointed as the first king of Israel in about 1048 BC—so about 330 years—Israel didn't have a strong human leader. God was their king, so they didn't have a human monarchy. They would go through these cycles, where the people would start to sin and fall into idolatry, so God would send some foreign king as discipline. Then the people would repent and cry out to God for help. So God would raise up a judge like Ehud, Gideon, or Samson to deliver Israel from their foreign oppressors. Then that guy would judge

Israel until his death, and after a little while the cycle started all over again. The people would fall into idolatry, God would send some foreign king as discipline, the people would repent, and God would raise up a judge to deliver them. This cycle repeated over and over again during the period of the judges. You can read about it in the book of Judges.

Samuel became the last of the judges. So this takes place toward the end of the period of the judges. God raised up Samuel, not as a response to a foreign king who was oppressing Israel, but as a response to the house of Eli the high priest, who was also the judge of Israel at that time (4:18).

Now Eli wasn't an overtly terrible guy. He didn't commit any of the sins we would think of as being really terrible, and he seems to have followed all the laws concerning the sacrifices. That was his job. But he doesn't seem to be a very good father. He had two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, and they were worthless men. Those aren't my words; that is actually the Bible's commentary on them (2:12). They profaned the sacrifices by eating the parts that were supposed to be sacrificed to the LORD (2:13-17), and they also committed adultery with the women who served at the tabernacle (2:22). Now Eli didn't do any of these things, but he's be guilty in a few ways. First, it seems that he did not teach his sons the Word of the LORD. The Bible's commentary on the two sons is that "they did not know the LORD" (2:12). We actually hear the same thing about Samuel when the LORD was calling him, that he "did not yet know the LORD" (3:7). This, it seems, is a failure on Eli's part for not teaching either his sons or Samuel the Word of the LORD. This is the sin of Eli that's hinted at in the text. The sin that he is more explicitly condemned for is that he knew of his sons' sin, but he did not restrain them (3:13). He knew they profaned the sacrifices, and he knew they committed adultery with the women who served at the tabernacle, but he did not restrain them. In this way he failed as a father, as the high priest, and as the judge of Israel.

Now this doesn't mean that parents are always guilty for their children's sin. Sometimes you teach your children the Word of God, and you do everything you can to restrain them from evil, but they might still grow up to be unbelieving and rebellious. In such cases, parents are not guilty for the sins they attempt to restrain. Of course, every parent sins against their children in many ways. So there is plenty for parents to confess before the LORD and to their children. But God does not hold against parents the sins which they attempt to restrain. However, if we neglect to teach our children the Word of God, and if we don't bother to restrain their sin, this is a grave sin on our part, and we should not be surprised if they grow up to be unbelieving and rebellious.

This was Eli's sin: he apparently did not teach his sons the Word of the LORD, and he certainly did not restrain their wickedness. Even into their adulthood, Eli had authority to restrain their sin, because his sons were priests, he was the high priest, and he was the judge of Israel, but he did not exercise his authority. And the LORD held him accountable for this.

And since God was going to punish the house of Eli for this, he needed to raise up someone else. And this someone else was Samuel. God began this work even before Samuel was born.

Samuel's mother, Hannah by name, had been barren. But she desperately wanted a child. So she prayed fervently to the LORD and vowed that if he would give her a son, she would give him to the LORD to serve him all the days of his life (1:11). And, sure enough, the LORD heard Hannah's prayer and opened her womb. She bore a son and called his name "Samuel," which means, "Heard of God" (1:20). God heard her prayer. Then, when the child was weaned, Hannah took him to Shiloh—that's where the tabernacle was in those days—and gave him to Eli (1:21-28). Hannah would visit him every year (2:19), but it was basically Eli who raised him. And Samuel, unlike Eli's actual sons, grew up to be great before the LORD.

In many ways, Samuel is a type of Christ. I'll explain what that means. In the Old Testament, there are various "types" of Jesus Christ. The word "type" is a technical theological term. Most technical theological terms have at least four syllables, so I feel a little cheated that the word "type" only has one. Anyway, a "type" is a prophetic pattern or a foreshadowing of Christ. Types are often people, but sometimes they can be objects or events. And they're certainly not identical to Jesus, but they have certain similarities that set a prophetic pattern. So they foreshadow or prophesy of Christ just by the way they are. Samuel is, in many ways, a type of Christ.

First, there is the miracle surrounding his birth. His mother Hannah was barren, but God opened her womb. This foreshadows the greater miracle of the virgin Mary conceiving by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Second, we have the prayer both mothers pray. One of the things Mary the mother of Jesus is famous for is what we call "The Magnificat." It's this song in Luke 1(:46-55) that Mary says when she's visiting her relative Elizabeth. But Mary wasn't the originator. She's really just quoting Hannah, who first prayed it in 1 Samuel 2(:1-10). So Samuel and Jesus have this in common as well, that their mothers both had the same prayer.

A third similarity is that Samuel doesn't have a negative word written about him in the Bible, at least, not that I could find. There are very few people in the Old Testament who have more than a chapter or two devoted to them without having a negative word. We think of Joshua and Daniel, who are also types of Christ. I can't think of a negative word written concerning either of them. There might be a few others, like some of the prophets, but not many. Almost everyone else has something negative written about them, including many of the big names, like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samson, David, Solomon, Elijah, and many, many others. Now this doesn't mean that Samuel was sinless. But his faithfulness, as recorded in Scripture, foreshadows faithfulness of Jesus Christ. God would raise up an even more faithful Judge.

Fourth, and this is the last similarity I'm aware of, is the broad scope of Samuel's office. There were three major offices in the Old Testament: prophet, priest, and king. Normally, these offices were filled by different people. It was kind of like God's version of the separation of powers. The priests were from the tribe of Levi. The kings were from the tribe of Judah. And the prophets could occasionally be priests, but usually they were something else. One of the special things about Jesus is that he fills all three of these offices. He was and still is our prophet, priest, and king. Each of these Old Testament offices were types that pointed ahead to Jesus. Samuel is the Old Testament figure who probably comes the closest to filling all three offices. He was a priest. He was also a prophet. And even though he wasn't a king, he was the last judge of Israel, and he was the king-maker. That is, when Israel demanded a king, it was Samuel who anointed Saul as the first king. And then when Saul sinned and the LORD rejected Saul, it was Samuel again who anointed David. By filling all of these offices, he foreshadows Jesus.

So that's who Samuel was. Now let's look a little bit at his call. There are two basic truths we learn about God.

First, we learn that God punishes sin. God is serious about sin. Eli had sinned. His sons had also sinned. And God was going to punish them for it. But this isn't the first time God vowed to punish Eli's house. Back in chapter two God sent a prophet to speak to Eli concerning this. The prophet even told Eli that both of his sons would die on the same day as a sign against him (2:34). But Eli did not repent. And again, when Eli hears from Samuel that the LORD is going to

GOD SPEAKS (1 Samuel 3:1-20)

fulfill this punishment, he still doesn't repent. He says, "It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him" (3:18). This kind of sounds like a pious response, but it's really faithless. He has no trust in the LORD's mercy. Instead of repenting, he would rather let his sons go on sinning. This is really a faithless response. Whenever we are confronted with our sin, repentance is the right response. That is, we confess our sins, believing that God will forgive us. Eli, being the high priest, should know that the LORD is compassionate and forgiving. That's what the sacrifices taught. But he either doesn't believe it, or he doesn't care. It comes about then in the next chapter that both Hophni and Phinehas die in a battle, and in that same battle, the ark of God was captured (4:11). When the messenger came and told Eli the news, he fell off his seat, broke his neck, and died (4:18). Thus, in one day God's judgment against Eli was fulfilled. God takes sin seriously, and he does punish those who do not repent. That's the first basic truth we learn about God.

The second basic truth we learn is that God speaks. He spoke to Samuel. He does not speak to all of us the same way he spoke to Samuel. With Samuel, God spoke in a very clear and audible voice. It's kind of funny; Samuel actually thought Eli was calling him. And Eli's lack of faith is seen in the fact that it took three times before Eli realized the LORD was calling Samuel. Now, if your kid comes into your bedroom three times in one night, saying, "You called me?" You will probably assume the kid is having a dream. And it's not faithless to think that. The difference between you and Eli is that your kid doesn't sleep right next to the holy of holies. Samuel is laying, maybe, ten feet from the Ark of the Covenant. But Eli has no recognition for what's on the other side of that curtain. So it wasn't Samuel's fault, but on the fourth call he finally knows that the LORD is speaking to him.

We see from this that if God wants to speak to us, he will speak to us. There's a temptation among Christians to have God speak to us personally. It might be fairly innocent; we might just want to know God's will for something specific that we're wrestling with. Often, I think it's more a matter of spiritual pride. We want to be the ones God speaks to. So we often hear Christians say something like, "The Lord laid it on my heart," or, "I just feel like God is saying to me ..." It's all internal. This is not the way we see God speaking in the Scriptures. Sometimes it's just an audible voice. Sometimes it's an audible voice in a vision. Sometimes it's an angel with an audible voice. Sometimes it's an audible voice through a burning bush. Sometimes it's an audible voice through a talking donkey. That's how we see God speak to people in the Bible. It's always external. What I mean is, it always comes from outside of the person who hears it. It's never hearing the voice from within. Christians today get this idea that God speaks to us through our hearts. That's some dangerous bologna right there. What we hear from our hearts may be pious, or it may be sinful, but the source of it is always our own hearts. It's not the voice of God. If God wants to speak to you personally. He will do it. You don't have to tune your heart to the right frequency. You don't have to learn to listen for his voice. God spoke to Samuel when he wasn't expecting it. Samuel didn't even know the LORD yet. God spoke to Balaam through a donkey when Balaam didn't even want to hear from God. If God wants to speak to you personally, he'll do it. You don't have to go looking for it. In fact, you probably shouldn't, because looking for it makes us more susceptible to finding something that isn't God's voice.

Rather, we hear God's voice in the one place we know it can be heard: in his Word. God spoke through the prophets and apostles for our sake (1 Pet. 1:12). We see this illustrated in the way God spoke to Samuel. It's kind of funny, there's something we would expect to be there in God's call to Samuel that is noticeably missing. Did you notice what isn't there? Anything about Samuel! God spends the whole time talking about what he is going to do to Eli's house. God

GOD SPEAKS (1 Samuel 3:1-20)

spoke to Samuel, but it wasn't a message for Samuel. When God spoke through the prophets and apostles, it wasn't a message for them; it was for us. Remember when I said that the Bible is a book about God. I need to add something to that. The Bible is a book about God *for us*. It's not *about us*, but it is *for us*. It's about God for us.

This is what we see in the way God speaks to Samuel. Eli was unfaithful. And the people of Israel suffered because of Eli's unfaithfulness. Faithless priests lead the people into faithlessness. But God was not unfaithful to his people. God is never unfaithful to his people. So he raised up Samuel, so that he could speak to his people through Samuel and call them back to repentance. That, ultimately, is why God spoke to Samuel. He rejected Eli and raised up Samuel because he loved his people and wanted them to repent. He spoke through Samuel because he wanted the people to know him in a saving way.

God speaks to us for our good. Even when it's a word of Law, like it was to Eli, the fact that God speaks is always a gracious thing, because the word of Law calls us to repent. When God's Word tells you something you don't want to hear, accept it. When it condemns your sin, believe it and repent. Confess your sins. Because, ultimately, God's Word forgives our sins. All of the Bible testifies to Jesus. And the Bible especially testifies of Jesus' death and resurrection, for that is how he accomplished our forgiveness. The Holy Scriptures, which are the very voice of God, speak forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

God takes sin seriously. And God punishes sin. Those who, like Eli and his sons, refuse to repent will receive God's wrath. God punishes sin. But he has also punished sin in his own Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus received what we all deserve. He endured that condemnation so that we might be forgiven. Repent. That is, confess your sins and believe the good news. In the Holy Scriptures God speaks this word to you: you are forgiven for Christ's sake. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.