

ALWAYS FAITHFUL

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Series B)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Old Testament lesson comes from *1 Samuel*, chapter 3, verses 1 through 20. In this Old Testament lesson, God proves himself faithful. 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.

ALWAYS FAITHFUL (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.

The Marines have a motto. It's pretty well known; I'm not telling you anything new: *Semper fidelis*. More often it's shortened to *Semper fi*. It's Latin for "always faithful." Faithfulness gets tested in adversity or when others around you are unfaithful. It's easy enough to be faithful when things are the way they are supposed to be and when other people act the way they are supposed to act. But what about when the situation is bad? What about when faithfulness costs you something you didn't expect to have to pay? Or what about when the people you have promised to be faithful to don't deserve your faithfulness? That's when it becomes difficult. And I suppose that's why the Marines chose this as their motto. They know that when faithfulness is difficult or undeserved, that's when it really matters. For the Marines it means that, even if the cost is your life, you remain faithful. It means that even if their country is unappreciative, they remain faithful. "Always faithful" means no exceptions.

Perfect faithfulness exists only in God. Throughout the Scriptures, we see God acting in faithfulness, even when his people are undeserving, and even when it costs him his own life. It's one of the major threads through the Old Testament. There's a lot of sinning in the Old Testament. But God made promises in the very beginning. He made promises to Adam and Eve after the fall into sin, then again to Abraham and his children, that he would restore his creation and redeem his people from sin and death. And even though God's people were often unfaithful to him, God remained faithful, because he promised to do these things, and it is his nature to be faithful.

So when we read the Old Testament, we should keep this principle in mind. Every single thing God does is an act of faithfulness to his people. That includes when he rejected Eli's house and called Samuel to be the new prophet and priest.

The story of Eli and Samuel is captivating. We read part of it here, but I'm going to try to fill in some of the space around it. To really understand and appreciate chapter three, we need to see it as part of a bigger story. So I would encourage you to read the first four chapters of 1 Samuel when you get home today. It's really a captivating story. I would categorize it as a hopeful tragedy. There are some terrible things that happen. The story ends badly for Eli, who isn't really a villain, but he's not a good guy either. He's very human, and some of us might even be able to empathize with him. But he's weak, and that leads to the downfall of himself and his sons. So it's a tragedy. But it's hopeful, because we see the hand of God very transparently. We see his mercy to Samuel, and his mother. And, ultimately, the story looks forward to Jesus, where God shows that he is faithful, even when we are unfaithful.

So I'll summarize the story, but I still want you to read the first four chapters of 1 Samuel when you get home today.

The story starts with a woman named Hannah. This is chapter 1. She and another woman were married to the same man. We see a few instances of polygamy in the Old Testament. It was not God's design, and it never went well. There was some rivalry between the two wives. Hannah was barren, while the other wife had children, so Hannah's rival taunted her over it. Kids today would say she was flexing. And it vexed Hannah. She prayed fervently for a child. And she vowed that if the LORD would give her a son, she would give that son back to the LORD. Eli

the priest noticed her when she was praying at the tabernacle. He thought she was drunk, so he rebuked her. But when he learned that she was not drunk, but fervently praying, he told her that God would grant her petition.

And God did. Hannah conceived and gave birth to Samuel. Then, when Samuel was a few years old, Hannah brought him to Eli, who took care of him, and Samuel served in the house of the LORD beginning from childhood. After that, Hannah had five more children.

So, in some ways, this is really a story about Hannah, and the favor God showed to her. He vindicated her from her rival's taunts. But even more so, God honored Hannah over Eli the priest. Hannah was a fervent and faithful woman, while Eli seems to be a believer, but he's weak and has very little zeal for the LORD. In the end, God honors Hannah and elevates her house over Eli's house.

In many ways, Hannah is a foreshadowing of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Both are mothers of miracle-children. And both of their sons belong to the LORD and do a special work for him. So Samuel is also a foreshadowing of Jesus, but Jesus, of course, far exceeds Samuel. The clear connection between Hannah and Mary is the song they both pray. We call it the Magnificat, and we usually use it as a prayer during our evening services, like Thanksgiving, Christmas, or on Wednesdays in Lent. Mary is most famous for it. She prays it in Luke 1, after the angel Gabriel announces the Christ to her. But it was actually Hannah's song first. She prayed it in 1 Samuel 2, after Samuel was born. It's a song of praise about how God brings down the mighty and lifts up the humble.

It's a story we see over and over again in the Bible, where God takes humble people, who are nobodies in the eyes of man, and he lifts them up. And, at the same time, he takes exalted people, like Eli, who was the high priest and the leader of Israel, and he brings them down to nothing. In the end, God honored Hannah over Eli.

In chapter 2, we learn more about Eli's family. The Bible says, quite plainly, "The sons of Eli were worthless men" (2:12). And it describes two of their sins. They were both priests, like their father. But these two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, profaned the sacrifices of God. The main job of priests was to offer sacrifices, and God gave very specific instructions about these sacrifices. One of the instructions was that, when the people came to make sacrifices to the LORD, a portion of the meat was to be given to the priests, this was part of how they received a living for their work. There were also specific instructions about what part was supposed to be burned on the altar, and what part should be given to the priests. Specifically, the fat was to be burned on the altar (Lev. 7:29-36). But, apparently, Eli's sons liked fatty meat, so when the people came to make sacrifices, they demanded that they give them their meat raw, with the fat on it, so they could prepare it for themselves the way they wanted it. And if the people refused, they would take it by force.

Now this wasn't just stealing from the people, but they were despising and profaning the sacrifices of God. They wanted to eat the part that God commanded to be sacrificed to him. God cares about how he is worshipped. He made very specific instructions in the Old Testament about how his people should worship him with sacrifices. Some of those commandments, we don't always know why God insisted on certain things, but in many places, we can see how they foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus. That was the big value of the sacrifices.

But Eli's sons disregarded God's instructions, and they dismissed his holiness. They did not treat God with the reverence he requires in worship. God gave instructions about how he is to be worshipped. There were a lot of specific requirements in the Old Testament. And there are fewer,

but still important instructions for New Testament worship. God requires reverence, not because he needs it, but because we need it. In worship, God reveals his Name to us. That is, his identity. He teaches us who he is so that we will call upon his Name and be saved. When Eli's sons profaned the sacrifices, they did not receive the blessing God intended for them, nor did the people whom they were supposed to be making sacrifices on behalf of. That was their first sin.

The second sin is that they laid with the women who were serving at the entrance of the tabernacle. This is especially disturbing. We know that at least one of the sons was married (4:19), probably both of them. And given that they were in positions of authority, we might surmise that they used it to coerce or pressure these women.

This also profaned the worship of God, because all the people of Israel knew about this, and it scandalized them. When the priests of God, the people who are supposed to be revealing the character of God to the people, live such wicked lives, it brings dishonor to the Name of God. The technical term for this is "blasphemy." Blasphemy is any speech or action that brings dishonor to or obscures the Name of God. And by "Name," we don't just mean the letters J-E-S-U-S or Y-H-W-H, but God's reputation. His Name is his identity. If the priests live this way, the people may conclude that God is wicked, incompetent, or just nonexistent to allow such things to continue. So the people will be scandalized and will not call upon the Name of the LORD for salvation. That's why it was especially sinful for the priests, or for pastors today, to fall into such a scandal.

Eli kept hearing about the sins of his sons, because everyone knew about it. And he warned them. He advised them not to commit these sins, but they did not listen to him (2:22-25). And in the end of chapter 2, the LORD sent a prophet to Eli to tell him that God had rejected him and his house. Basically, all the things the LORD spoke to Samuel in chapter 3, and more, he sent a prophet to tell Eli in chapter 2. The problem with Eli was that he did not restrain his sons. He advised them to stop, but he did not make them stop. In the end, he chose his sons over the LORD. But this, tragically, led to the death of his sons. The prophet in chapter 2 warned Eli that both of his sons would die on the same day. Chapter 4 is the tragic story of how that came to pass.

Then in chapter 3 we have the call of Samuel. This is where God chooses Hannah over Eli and Samuel over the sons of Eli.

There are several interesting little details that illustrate Eli's spiritual weakness. Physically, his "eyesight had begun to grow dim" (3:2). That, of course, is not a sin. It happens when we get old. But the author might include that detail because he's trying to paint the picture of Eli as a weak man, not just physically, but also spiritually.

Then God calls to Samuel four times. And Samuel thought it was Eli calling, because he didn't know the LORD yet, which seems like another indictment of Eli for not teaching the boy. And it took Eli three times to figure out that the LORD was calling the boy. We might think, "So what? If my kid kept coming into my room at night, saying that he heard a voice calling him, I'd think it was a dream." But here's the thing: our children don't sleep in the tabernacle. The author reminds us that the ark of God was there (3:3). From where Samuel was sleeping, next to the lamp, there was a curtain, and on the other side of that curtain was a small room where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. And that room is where God promised to dwell among his people. So when Samuel tells Eli that he heard a voice calling him, Eli should have considered the possibility that the God in that room right next to Samuel might be the one speaking. But it took

him three times. Eli didn't think much of the presence of God. So he seems to be a believer, but dimly.

Finally, on the fourth try, God has a conversation with Samuel. And God tells him that he will fulfill what he has already spoken to Eli. The reason is that his sons were blaspheming God, and Eli did not restrain them (3:13). Remember, to blaspheme means to dishonor or obscure the Name of God. Their sins dishonored the Name of God in the sight of the people. And this is especially bad because God has given us his Name so that we can call upon it and be saved. But the sons blasphemed the Name of the LORD, so that the people would not call upon God for salvation. Their sin led the people into unbelief. But God is faithful to his people. He wants them to be saved. So it is an act of faithfulness that he rejects Eli's house and establishes Hannah's in its place.

In the morning Eli demands that Samuel tell him everything. He even threatens the kid (3:17). This is the only place where Eli shows a bit of life. But when Samuel tells him, Eli simply says, "It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him" (3:18). This, I think, is the most tragic part of Eli's story. It might sound like a response of faith. He believes that what Samuel reported is true, and he didn't argue with it. But it's not faith. Eli believes that God is true, but he does not expect to receive mercy from him. And that's the problem. Faith is more than simply believing that God exists. Faith trusts that God is for us. That's what we should believe, because it's true. But Eli had no expectation of mercy. He did not confess his sin. He reacted as if God is just arbitrary, and he's going to do whatever he's going to do.

Now, we might think that God didn't offer him mercy; he just announced that he would destroy Eli's house. But God always desires to be merciful. And Eli was the priest, he should know this.

In contrast to Eli, next Sunday the Old Testament lesson comes from the prophet Jonah. We're going to hear how Jonah preached, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). There was no word of promise there, but the people decided to give repentance a shot. And God relented of the disaster he threatened. They called on the Name of the LORD and were saved. But Eli doesn't. And that's the most tragic part. He has no expectation of mercy. He does not truly understand the LORD.

Now that's the tragedy. But I said this is a hopeful tragedy, and it is. Because, in all of this, including the rejection of Eli's house, God was being faithful to his people, and he was raising up a new prophet and priest in Samuel, who would faithfully shepherd the people.

The Old Testament is filled with this stuff. It's a never-ending cycle of God's people and their leaders becoming unfaithful, God disciplining them and reinstating faithful rulers to bring Israel back, then Israel falling into unfaithfulness again, and God bringing them back again. It went on and on, but God continued to prove himself faithful until, finally, he sent a new ruler, a prophet, priest, and king, who reigns eternally.

In his faithfulness, God sent his Son Jesus. He did not weaken in his faith. He did not become unfaithful to his Father or his people. But he is always faithful. And he does more than lead us. Like all the other leaders, he dies. But he also rises again. He was rejected and killed, like Eli's sons, but not for his own unfaithfulness. He was crucified for our unfaithfulness, thus demonstrating his faithfulness to us. And he was raised to live forever as our prophet, priest, and king. And he rules.

We may forget that this is our Father's world.

ALWAYS FAITHFUL (1 Samuel 3:1-20)

“That tho the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.

This is my Father’s world

The battle is not done;

Jesus who died shall be satisfied,

And earth and heav’n be one” (“This Is My Father’s World,” *Ambassador Hymnal*, #191).

God is “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). He “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). So even though we see people stray into unbelief, or reject God altogether. And even though we too may waver, if this is the will of God, and it is, we should expect God to act. And he will.

God has proven himself faithful, and he promises mercy to all who seek him. Everyone who calls on the Name of Jesus will be saved. Amen.

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