

Two Minute Bible Study - Living in the Promised Land

For the past couple of weeks, we have heard about the people of Israel, following Moses out of slavery in Egypt and across the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. You may remember from last fall that Moses died before the people arrived there, and it was left to his deputy Joshua to lead the people across the Jordan and to conquer the land they had been promised. Once they were settled, Joshua called all the people together at Shechem and challenged them to choose whom they would serve – the faithful God who had brought them to this land, with whom they had a covenant relationship that extended back for centuries, or the gods of agriculture and fertility of the peoples they had just conquered. “As for me and my household,” Joshua said, “we will serve the Lord.” The Bible tells us that all the people took the same oath, to serve only Yahweh, to remain in their covenant relationship with the Lord.

That worked pretty well for a while. The people were organized into a tribal confederacy, not really a nation state in any way we would think of that today. Each of the twelve tribes had its own tribal leader, called “judges.” They were both military leaders and also dispensers of wisdom. The twelve tribes were united by a shared faith, with worship centered in Shiloh, at the tent where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, and an hereditary priesthood held sway. Those priests were the sign and symbol of God’s ultimate rule for all the tribes of Israel.

But, over time, the people who had actually wandered in the wilderness with Moses, those who had experienced a deep and resonant relationship with Yahweh, were no more, and their children and grandchildren did not know God in the same way. The worship of Yahweh became formalistic, and the hereditary priesthood became corrupt. The Bible tells us that when people brought their animal offerings to God, the priests would extort or steal the meat for their own meals. And some priests were sexually abusive as well. The whole political and social and religious structure of the people of Israel was crumbling from within. At the same time, Israel was threatened from without by surrounding Philistine armies. The most famous Philistine, the one you surely remember from childhood, was the giant Goliath. So, the people of Israel were under existential threat, from both within and without.

It is at this moment when we come to today’s scripture, God’s unexpected, norm-shattering, disrupting call to the young boy Samuel, to deliver difficult messages to those in power, in governance and in the priesthood. It is a moment of turning from the old tribal confederacy to the monarchy and eventually to the great King David, who is central to the story of the people of Israel.

Here I Am, Lord - 1 Samuel 3
October 10, 2021 – Center Harbor Congregational Church
UCC Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

I love a brand-new box of crayons. It just smells like the start of a new school year to me, a chance to meet a new teacher, to make new friends, to learn something new. There are so many possibilities in a new box of crayons. The magenta isn’t broken yet. The sky-blue crayon hasn’t been used down to a nub. Forest green hasn’t rolled away under my bed, never to be seen again. I haven’t made any mistakes or colored outside the lines with these crayons – yet. I haven’t yet left this box too close to the heater, so that they melt and run together. Last year’s box of crayons has long since been dumped into the basket of crayon nubs left over from previous school years. I always hated to use those crayons. They just seemed so ... used up. All the things that went wrong with those boxes, haven’t happened with this box yet. All the wonderful possibilities are still before me. A new box of crayons is a fresh start, a chance to leave all the old mistakes behind, a chance to draw a new picture, and an omen of a good school year ahead.

I feel the same way about a new bar of soap. When I visited my grandmother in the summer, I would play barefoot outdoors all day long. In the evening, before bedtime, she would send me off for a bath with Dove soap. All the dirt of that long day would swirl down the drain. No matter how dirty my feet had gotten from a hard day of play, they were always fresh and clean by the time I went to bed. When I smell Dove soap in my bathroom today, I am reminded of that feeling, that moment when all the dirt of my day was gone, and even my bare feet were clean enough to slide between the crisp, sweet-smelling sheets that had been dried on the clothes line out in the fresh air.

A new bar of soap and a new box of crayons are powerful symbols for me of the chance to begin again, to leave behind what has been used up, the things that have not turned out as I hoped, the day that got the better of me, the things whose time has come and gone. A new start. A clean slate. Today’s scripture is about one of those times of turning, from the old, worn-out, corrupted past to a fresh new beginning, where all good things are possible again. A time when God is determined to do a new thing.

There are two main characters in this story: Eli and Samuel. Eli is an old priest, nearly blind, and the father of two very corrupt sons who are beginning to take over his priestly role. Samuel is a boy, no longer a little child, but not yet a man, who has been given to the service of the Lord as an offering by his parents. Eli is not only the priest in charge, he is also Samuel's foster father, his only family. At night, Samuel sleeps right in the tent with the Ark of the Covenant, while Eli sleeps in another tent nearby.

One night, God calls "Samuel, Samuel." Little Samuel wakes up and thinks it is Eli calling him, so he runs to Eli's tent and says, "Here I am, for you called me." Eli thinks Samuel must have been dreaming, so he sends him back to bed. Three times this happens, and finally Eli realizes what is going on. He tells Samuel to go back and listen carefully. If the voice calls again, he says, Samuel is to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Samuel does as he is told, and sure enough, God appears right in the tent with him and calls, "Samuel, Samuel." Obediently Samuel responds, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

God tells Samuel to deliver a tough message to Eli. His priesthood is over. His own sons will not follow him as priests. God has severed the historic and hereditary relationship between God and this priestly family, because Eli's sons have corrupted it irretrievably. They have blasphemed, dishonored ritual sacrifice, and sexually abused women at the temple. There is no turning back. The past is over. God is doing a new thing.

As you can imagine, Samuel does not want to deliver this message the next morning. Eli is the only family Samuel has left. Yet Eli calls, and Samuel comes. "Here I am," he says. Eli commands Samuel to tell him God's message fully, and Samuel manages to speak the words God has commanded him to speak. "God is angry with you and with your sons, so angry that God has determined to sever God's relationship with you and to begin again. God's decision cannot be undone." Eli quietly accepts God's judgment.

Often, when we think of this story, we focus just on the fact that God called this young boy to be both a prophet and a judge for Israel. God's call can go to those we would least expect, those who have no formal training or life experience, people entirely unlike ... well ... entirely unlike me, and unlike anyone we ever see in the pulpit. Samuel has a naïve faithfulness, a simple willingness to listen and do as he is told, that makes him perfect for God's call in this moment.

The fact that God has called Samuel, a little boy, rather than a more experienced person or someone with a reputation or training is important in this story, but it is not the center of it. The kernel of this story is the content of the message that Samuel must deliver. The old way of doing things is not meeting the current need. Decentralized tribal governance is not serving the people of Israel well. Philistine armies are advancing and threatening the people with utter destruction. The worship of Yahweh has become so corrupted that it cannot be the stabilizing, holy center for this nation of God's people. From within and from without, Israel is crumbling. So, God sends in someone to clean house, to announce a fresh start, and that person is Samuel, a boy with no investment yet in the way things have been. Someone who simply listens to God and acts on what he hears.

God offers us a fresh start every day, every week, whenever we are willing to take it. A fresh new box of crayons, with the best pictures still waiting to be drawn. A new bar of soap, ready to wash away the dirt of the day and send us to bed in clean sheets. And sometimes, if we are a little too comfortable in a life that is not working anymore, God insists on a fresh start. That message will pinch. It is a voice we must listen for, carefully. For if what is old in our lives is unhealthy or corrupted or simply not serving its purpose, it may be time to move on, to clean house, to commit to a new beginning, to begin afresh with a holy center. When God calls with this message, the only possible response is, "Here I am, Lord. Speak for your servant is listening."

God offers us a fresh start today, a chance to leave all the old mistakes behind, to move beyond whatever is "used up" in our lives, a chance to draw a new picture. Thanks be to God for new beginnings, and for the courage at every age to begin again.

Amen.