

Beloved children

Bishop Sarah's sermon for 17 January 2020

Epiphany 2, 17th January 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-10

May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The first time I preached on our Old Testament passage set for today: 1 Samuel, chapter 3, verses 1-10, the call of Samuel, I was expecting our son. There was something incredibly personal and powerful in the experience of reading again the story of Hannah's trust in the faithfulness of God and of her obedience in fulfilling her promise to God.

Often, we read or hear the Bible in bits and pieces, which doesn't always help us to understand the overall flow and meaning. The books of Samuel tell of the emergence of Samuel as God's leader in Israel, a leader who will prepare the way for David as King. As the books begin, Israel is struggling under pressure from the Philistines, politically weak and economically disadvantaged, but also a community in moral chaos, waiting for a king who will defend them and lead them forward as a united community.

However, the books of Samuel do not immediately rush to tell us of David - first there is the waiting. And at the moment we all know something about waiting don't we?

- Waiting for the day when we can see our loved ones and friends again.
- Waiting for the time when we can get together for major life events without having to restrict numbers.
- Waiting for the day when we can see one another face without a mask, when we can shake hands, hug one another and sit next to someone.
- Waiting for our COVID vaccinations.
- Waiting to see whether our children & grandchildren can safely return to their usual pattern of schooling.

So much waiting.

From my perspective, one of the most interesting things about our particular passage today is what has already happened in the biblical narrative, before it begins.

The first book of Samuel opens with the introduction of a family, the husband, Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. It is Hannah who is to become the focus as her waiting and trust in God encourage her to believe that God will answer her prayer for a son. We are invited to listen and to notice that waiting and hoping can result in blessing.

The first chapter begins in waiting, records the answer to Hannah's prayer and ends with the fulfilment of her promise to give her son over to the service of the God she loves and trusts. We see God's transformative power at work in the life of an individual, a family and a community. God bringing life and hope out of waiting and despair.

Hannah's son, her gift from God, is Samuel: this name is often interpreted as meaning 'God has heard'. God heard the cry of Hannah's heart as she prayed to him at Shiloh. Hannah prayed for a child and, when her prayer was answered:

'She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the Lord for him."
(1 Samuel 1: 20.)

Hannah takes Samuel to Eli at Shiloh as soon as he is 'weaned' (maybe as young as 2 or 3 years old in those times) to give thanks to God. What a sacrifice she makes. We understand that this was the fulfilment of a promise, but can any of us imagine actually doing this? Samuel is a special gift from God to Hannah, and a special gift back to God, from Hannah. God is faithful and Hannah is faithful in fulfilling her promise.

Hannah's Song, in chapter 2 speaks of her joy, but also God's power. It speaks of her son, but also has a wider perspective - anticipating that God will reorder society in the interests of those who are poor and weak and have no standing. This song becomes the song of Mary in Luke 1: 46 -55, and the source for Luke's radical portrayal of Jesus. This song becomes a source of hope in a world where people can no longer believe the promises of rulers. It is a song which trusts in the powerful gifts of God.

Following Hannah's song, we hear of the sons of Eli, 'wicked men' with 'no regard for the Lord' we are told. There is an interesting contrast here between the boy Samuel and the sons of Eli (Hophni and Phinehas) who disobeyed the will of God and whose behaviour brought shame on their father and on their House.

Near the end of chapter 2 a 'man of God' comes to tell Eli that his sons are bringing shame on his House and on the call God made on the House of Eli, to minister before Him. Therefore, we hear in verse 35:

'I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his house, and he will minister before my anointed one always.'

The focus of Chapter 3 is not, however, on the ending announced for Eli but rather on the new beginning now to be brought into being for Samuel, gifted to God in obedience and raised in obedience.

Chapter 3, our passage for today, begins with God's call on Samuel. A well-known passage where we encounter the boy Samuel hearing a voice in the night calling his name. Samuel mistakes the voice for Eli and goes to him to see what is needed.

We have already been warned in verse 1 that 'In those days the word of the Lord was rare...' and that '...there were not many visions' so there is no air of expectation. Eli himself, although much older and wiser, doesn't recognise that it is God speaking to Samuel until Samuel has come to him three times. But he then gives Samuel the words he is to speak if God calls to him again. Samuel is totally dependent on Eli's wisdom and support.

The roles between the two of them are then reversed as Eli is deprived of the word of God and it is given to Samuel. Eli is now dependent on him to hear the word of God.

When Samuel responds to God's call, the message he hears is not expected - what an introduction to a prophetic calling, to have to deliver such a difficult message to Eli. Samuel learns at this early stage that his words will not always be easy, either for him to speak or for others to hear, but Samuel and Eli are obedient in the delivery of the message and the receipt of it. Samuel had been dedicated to God in obedience and Eli had nurtured him in obedience. The two now stand together in obedience to face the will of God.

The call of Samuel, in Samuel 3 is one of the great call narratives. The focus of the passage is not on what is ending for Eli but on what is beginning for Samuel. Samuel is the bearer of revelation and revelation is precious to God and not to be wasted or ignored.

Now our gospel passage for today brings us to another call narrative, Nathanael is 'called' by Philip to 'come and see' Jesus, as Philip describes him:

“..the one Moses wrote about in the law”

And, in turn, Nathanael responds to Jesus' call declaring:

“ Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”

We then hear the most amazing revelation from Jesus:

“You believe because I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that”.

He then added,

“Truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” (John 1: 50-51.)

The main lesson of this passage is clear and simple: Heaven stands open, and through Jesus Christ the reality of heaven and the presence of God becomes ccessible to everyone. This declaration is addressed to all of us and it is for everyone.

The reference to “angels ascending and descending” recalls Jacob's dream, recounted in Genesis 28, when he saw a ladder set up between earth and heaven. Jesus is referencing what will be a well known story of faith to convey that God and the reality of the unseen world, have

come near. God may seem beyond all thought and imagination, yet he has become present through his only son, Jesus Christ.

This image of Jesus as the door between heaven and earth provides a framework for our understanding of Jesus and his ministry.

And so, what is it that we are called to?

- We are called to respond to Jesus' invitation to follow him.
- We are called to be like Jesus: to wait on God, to hope, to look past our fear, to trust in God and to respond to his call.

This year what will that look like for you, what will that look like for our church, for our community, for our nation and our world?

We cannot see or know the future but we can know that in our waiting we can call on God to guide and strengthen us.

We can know that as we move forward, we are held close to the heart of God, enfolded in his love and that he will walk with us through all the times ahead, for he is a faithful God.

Amen.

*+Sarah Bullock
Bishop of Shrewsbury*