

“On Hold on the Hotline”
1 Samuel 3:1-10
Sunday, Jan 14, 2018
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As we hear the story of Samuel and Eli begin to unfold, we are told that the story takes place in a particular kind of ERA. / The story takes place in a particular kind of TIME in history. / Samuel and Eli are in an ERA - or a TIME - in which:

"the word of God was rare" - - it says.

We are told that there were: "no frequent visions of God."

Can you IMAGINE what such a TIME would be like?? //

A time - - when the word of God - - seemed to be a rare thing?

It would be a time - - when God seemed to be silent?

Maybe it would be a time - - when things seemed to be going wrong all over?

Would that be a time - - anything like the year 2017?

Most of the “year in review” articles I saw referred to 2017 as an unpleasant year.

It was - - a time of storms and fires and floods.

2017 was a time of sex scandals and accusations and confessions.

A time of Russia investigations and North Korean missiles.

And lots and lots of negativity - - swirling around the presidency.

Maybe we should have known back in February after the crazy overtime Super Bowl win - - or when the envelope for the winner of the Academy Awards was switched and the wrong winner announced - - that it was going to be a strange year.

Well it's been a strange and challenging and in some ways ugly year.

The New York Times year in pictures headline was:

“Tragedy. Triumph. Trump. Photographs that tell the story of a world in tumult.”

Perhaps - - you can make the case that - - the world is in tumult.

But - - does that mean it was a year in which the word of God was - - rare?

Imagine a different time, in which things seemed to be - - “in tumult”:

A time of Watergate and Vietnam and killings of Black people in the South.

Or - - a time of Hitler - - and stormtroopers - - and concentration camps.

Or - - a time of Civil War in the American South.

Do you think that any of these seemed to the people who experienced them to be:

A time - - - when God - - - seemed to have put the world - - on HOLD?

A time - - - - when the word of God - - - - seemed to be - - rare?

Well - - it was INTO such a time - - that God SPOKE - - a word to Samuel.

Samuel - - came to be a PROPHET - - to nations and kings - - and addressed all kinds of BIG problems - - in the history and politics of ancient Israel.

Samuel is the one who anointed BOTH king Saul and king David.

Israel’s greatest king - - and the not so great king that came before him.

It was a time of war - - with the Philistines - - who had big weapons.

It was a time of fear - - in which the Israelites felt insecure.

And into a time of big problems - - stepped Samuel.

And God did something that seemed to have been missing - - God spoke.

God spoke to Samuel who would address these big problems.

&YET - this word was spoken to Samuel in a very PERSONAL way.

This word from God was spoken to Samuel when he is all ALONE - - in the midst of SLEEP - - and Samuel was hardly expecting ANY word to be spoken. / After all - - the word of God was RARE. // Right. // But HERE it IS!

And it is - - as if - - SAMUEL has his own personal HOTLINE to God. / Just what the world seems to NEED - - at the time. // And SAMUEL has it! And it is as if - - Samuel just - - puts God - - - - - on HOLD.

Samuel HEARS - - - but he doesn't ANSWER God - - - because he can't even CONCEIVE of - - what is happening to him. / He is just NOT READY - - to hear God - - and so - - he puts God on HOLD.

Samuel hears - - but he isn't sure if he can believe it.

So I'm going to put the Samuel story on hold for a minute - - and jump back to the present day again. / The Golden Globe awards last week. / The morning after the awards - - and a speech by Oprah Winfrey - - the Washington Post ran an article titled: "Oprah could run. Oprah could win. Is America going insane or coming to its senses?"

I will not take a position on who should run for president today.

The point I am after is about how to decide whether one is - -
 - - insane - - or coming to ones senses.

That's the place Samuel finds himself.

He's not being told to run for kingship - - but rather to be a prophet.

And the point the article makes is that there are lots of people in America who are longing for something different - - in the public discourse - - than the negativity that has gripped the last year. / And there is something about the OPTIMISM of Oprah - - that captures it - - for - - at least some people.

In her speech she said:

“I’ve interviewed and portrayed people who have withstood some of the ugliest things life can throw at you - - but the one quality all of them seem to share is an ability to maintain HOPE for a BRIGHTER MORNING - - even during our darkest nights”

In this morning’s scripture reading - - Samuel is asleep when God speaks to him.

It is a dark night.

And DAWN is just about to break.

The morning is just about to come.

And Samuel lies still in the dark - - waiting for morning.

God has spoken to him - - three times - - on his personal hotline.

But he puts God on hold - - at first - - and waits.

And I believe that - - THAT - - - is why the word of God was so RARE. //

Not because of God.

But because of how WE put God - - on HOLD - - and how people before us put God on hold - - and how Samuel - - put God on hold. //

Samuel's behavior - reminds me of a couple of stories.

My dad bought a burglar alarm for our house, when I was in High School. / He didn't buy the alarm because we had anything particularly priceless - - not because of piles of valuables. / He bought it because it is a dangerous world out there - - because we live in a time - - when the word of God is rare. // AND - - he bought it - - because he is a GADGET man - he likes any kind of gadget - - and because it was on SALE.

He installed the alarm, and we went off to church - - feeling very SAFE.

We expected a day like any other day.

But - - like anything else NEW - - it took time to ADJUST to the routine of setting the alarm - - and turning it off. / BUT - - it is very important - - to REMEMBER to turn it OFF when you GET HOME - - otherwise you set your OWN alarm off.

I'll never forget looking out the back door of our house - - and realizing we were SURROUNDED by police officers! / Dad had forgotten to turn the alarm off. / And that Sunday - - the neighbors got quite a show.

As we sat INSIDE our house - - an urgent message was being sent OUT - - and we were oblivious. / In a similar way - - God is sending out an urgent message - - in this morning's Old Testament reading - - and Samuel is OBLIVIOUS.

Like a giant billboard - - written in a foreign language - - God's message LOOMS in front of Samuel - - and he can't make anything of it.

And this is an important image - - - for those of us - - - who may be trying to hear God. / Those of us who are - - trying to do the right thing - - but not quite there.

And - - for those of us - - who IGNORE God from time to time.

And - - those of us - - who ignore each other.

Those of us - - who HEAR something called out - - we think - - but we don't know how to respond.

Those of us - - who think that the reason we can't hear God - - or can't figure out God's way - - for OUR lives - - is because God is NOT TALKING. / /

Maybe the reason we can't hear God - - - is NOT because God is silent - - - - BUT rather - - - because WE haven't prepared ourselves to hear.

Maybe it is NOT GOD - - who has put our WORLD on HOLD - - but WE who have put God on HOLD.

Maybe that is at least PART of why the world seems so in TUMULT?!

AND - - like Samuel - - we probably don't do this kind of thing out of MALICE - - or out of EVIL intentions. / At least not completely.

Partly it's just that we couldn't CONCEIVE of God - actually - really - communicating with us - - and showing US a way to make the world a better place.

But God does want to show us - - I believe.

Just like God wanted to talk to Samuel.

Three times - - Samuel was awakened by a voice calling him: "Samuel"

And each time - - - Samuel woke up Eli - - - thinking it was Eli.

But Eli - - just like a parent who has heard too many requests for a glass of water at bedtime - - sends Samuel back to sleep. / Maybe just a bad dream.

Just another false alarm.

But - - it is NO false alarm.

God is REALLY calling to Samuel.

And after a while - - Eli - - being an older man with more experience - - Eli begins to understand what is going on. / So Eli says to Samuel:

"Go back - - and lie down - - and WAIT for God. And when God speaks - - THIS TIME - - DON'T get up and run to ME - - - but stay there - - on your OWN.

And say, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears."

These must have been lonely words at first.

It must have been scary - - for Samuel - - to realize that Eli - - the person on whom he had DEPENDED - - - the one he had always been able to turn to for insight and approval - - - was not going to be there for him.

Just like beginning to ride a bicycle - - for the first time - - withOUT training wheels. / That confident feeling is gone. / But now - - - instead of CLINGING - - to Eli - - Samuel has to rely on himself.

And in relying on himself - - Samuel - - - begins to figure out WHO he IS.

He claims his IDENTITY - - as a PROPHET of God. / His TASK is a BIG one. Leadership of Israel. / Samuel was to become the VOICE through which God would speak to others.

Samuel had a lot of messages to deliver.

Messages to Kings. / And even a message to Eli.

Like a paper boy - - who has learned to ride a bicycle - - and NOW has a lot of PAPERS to deliver - - - Samuel had messages to deliver - - on God's behalf.

And perhaps the most painful - - is the one he must deliver to Eli. / Eli is the very man - - who had shown Samuel the way to God. / The man who had treated Samuel like a SON - - even calling him "Son" - - though it wasn't BIOLOGICALLY so.

And NOW Samuel - - had to tell Eli - - - that God intended to PUNISH his OWN biological sons - - for blaspheming - - and cheating - - and wickedness.

Eli - - whose OWN sons didn't end up so great - - has helped nurture this PROPHET of God - - and has treated him like a son.

And he has let Samuel go - - to be - - who God created him to be.

The way Eli let's Samuel go - - reminds me of how a potter I watched - - years ago - - Mr. Sasha Macovkin - - how he described working with clay. / He said: "When you work with clay - - you must first get it centered on the wheel. / In order to do that - - when you form the sides of the bowl you have to RELEASE the clay very gently.

You have to release the clay from your hands. / If you let go suddenly - it becomes lopsided. / Instead you have to release it - - so it hardly notices you are doing it. / "And" - - he said - - "so is God - - with us."

God is always molding us - - and then - - very gently letting us go - -
 - - so we hardly notice.

As Eli lets Samuel go - - -

- - - he may even KNOW - - that Samuel will one day speak the truth to him - - about his sons. / It won't be all fun, and simple. / It might even HURT.

But Eli knows - - that letting Samuel go - - is more important.

Because as Samuel rides out on his own - - he is beginning something completely new. / He is on his own with God. / He is on the hotline - - and he is LISTENING now.

No matter what TUMULT is out there in the world - - Eli is listening for God.

Now instead of thinking that the REASON for the TUMULT is that God is SILENT - - INSTEAD - - Samuel knows that the reason for the tumult is IN US.

And God is just trying to get a word in.

When Samuel wakes up - - Samuel is ready to HEAR.

May it be so - - for you and for me.

Amen.

