

SLD 01.18.15 2<sup>nd</sup> Ordinary MLK Weekend  
I Samuel 3: 1-20  
Emory Presbyterian Church  
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### “Tingling Ears”

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. *The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.*

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 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. Then the Lord called, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ and he said, ‘Here I am!’ 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. The Lord called again, ‘Samuel!’ Samuel got up 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.’ Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” ’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’ Then the Lord said to Samuel, **‘See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.** On that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house for ever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.’

Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, ‘Samuel, my son.’ He said, ‘Here I am.’ 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 God told you.’ So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, ‘It is the Lord; let God do what seems good to God.’

As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

Three times God calls to a young, sleeping Samuel and still he doesn't get it. Thinks it's Eli's voice.

God calls; we don't always hear God.  
God calls; we don't always know it's God.

Then, interestingly, it's Eli's voice that instructs Samuel: "that's the Lord calling you, boy. Next time it happens, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

God calls Samuel a fourth time, Samuel answers accordingly, and God speaks, saying, 'boy, I'm fixin' to make your ears tingle, and anybody else's who hears it. Because, boy, did your boss ever mess up, and is he ever going to get it!'

God calls; we don't always like what we hear.

Eli wakes up, demands to know the scoop, but Samuel does *not* want to tell him.

God calls; we don't always know what to do.

'Boy, you *better* tell me!'

God calls; we don't always want to do what God tells us to do.

But since he's scared of God and Eli both, Samuel finally spills the bad news.

Do you wonder what Eli and his sons did that was so unforgivable?

Well, as members of the tribe of Levi and direct descendants of Aaron, Eli and his sons were specially chosen to be priests of God. As the only ones authorized to process the offerings given by people to atone for their sins, this also makes them pretty much the gatekeepers of salvation.

Only Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, weren't doing the job right. "While it's okay for priests to eat a portion of the people's offerings, God's very particular about which portions. A priest can't just hog down all the best parts. One very firm rule is that all the fat belongs to God." [I don't know; maybe it was meant to prevent heart disease.] But Eli's wicked sons were inclined to keep some of fat portions for themselves. In fact,

they *forced* people to give them raw meat instead of boiled so it'd still have the fat on it.

(1 Sam. 2:15-16)<sup>1</sup>

“Now, this is outrageous behavior. I mean, if you believed that your entire relationship with God were dependent on perfect sacrifices and you have a priest who’s mangling your offerings, you’d be pretty upset, right?

What’s more, messing with sacrifices wasn’t the only wickedness Eli’s sons were up to – they were also having their way with various temple assistants of the female persuasion. And to make matters worse, ole’ Eli knows exactly what they’re up to and neither stops nor even disciplines them. I mean, he gives them a slap on the wrist, but they just blow him off. Deuteronomy says he should’ve *stoned* ‘em for their wickedness.

*Therefore Yahweh declares to Eli: Those who honor Me I will honor, but those who despise Me will be disdained. ...I will cut short your strength and the strength of your priestly house ...no one in your family line will ever reach old age. ...and all your descendants will die in the prime of life. (1 Sam. 2:34-36)*

The priesthood of Eli and his family will be destroyed. By the time little Sammy comes along, Eli and his descendants have already been yanked out of favored status as priests and placed under a generational curse. And who else gives voice to this harsh truth? Who dares unleash God's power into the affairs of rulers and nations?

Why, in today’s text, it’s little Sammy whom God wakes to speak truth to power. Because the priests cannot rule effectively, and because the Israelites cry for it, God will appoint a conventional king, with Samuel, though he does not yet know it, destined to be kingmaker.<sup>2</sup> The story of Samuel's call establishes his authority eventually to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://924jeremiah.wordpress.com/2014/02/06/three-priests-who-went-to-hell-lessons-learned-from-eli/>

<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

empower the transfer of priestly leadership from Eli and his family to King Saul, reinforcing hope in a God that refreshes and renews.

This weekend we celebrate the call of another prophet who faced squarely the failings of the authorities of his day, and spoke the truth to power: Dr. Martin Luther King. God called Dr. King to a lifetime of advancing social justice, of unleashing God's power into the affairs of rulers and nations, of shifting power from the leadership of a few to the participation of the many, and of reinforcing hope in a God that refreshes and renews.

Indeed, for such advancing, and unleashing, and shifting, and reinforcing, Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. In just a moment we're going to listen together his acceptance speech. And when we do, let's pretend that his is a voice, like Samuel's, through which God sends a message of challenge. And let's imagine ourselves as like Samuel, too, since the word of the Lord is rare in these days, as well, and visions are not widespread. Likewise, just as for Samuel,

when God calls, we don't always hear God.  
when God calls, we don't always know it's God.  
when God calls, we don't always like what we hear.  
or know what to do, or want to do what God tells us.

Still, let's listen carefully for anything in Dr. King's speech that makes our ears tingle. And if they do, if you feel some tingling in your ears, I hope you will say in your heart, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'

To the glory of God. Amen.