

Sermon – January 17, 2021
“Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

I remember my call to be a prophet like it was yesterday. It happened at Shiloh in the temple. I had been taken there by my mother and father as one dedicated to Adonai, the one true God, for life. I was very young when I was left at the temple and really don't remember my family life all that well. My life was connected instead to the rhythms of the temple. My family came each year to offer the sacrifice to Adonai and they brought gifts for me, usually a new robe that my mother had made. Not many people came to the temple in those days. It was a time when the people of Israel had no king, and all of the people did what was right in their own eyes. It was also a time when Adonai was quiet and the words from Him were rare. The people of Israel were drifting away from God.

Eli the priest was my daily guide. It was he who taught me to serve before the Lord. He taught me to read and write Hebrew, to know the festivals of worship given in the Law, and to serve before Adonai in the temple. While Eli had taught me much about the service of Adonai, I did not then know Adonai or His word. One of my many services before Adonai was to sleep in the main room of the temple where the lamp of Adonai was lit at night, keeping light in the room to mark the presence of Adonai. The lamp was filled each evening with oil and then lit. It would last until the dawn of the new day when we all took time to start our day with the words of the Shema, “Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai alone. You shall love Adonai with all of your heart, soul, and strength.” It was my job to open the doors of the temple just after dawn so that those gathered could repeat those words before Adonai as they started their day.

Eli lay down at night in the part of the temple that had been built for priests to live in and was a little way from where I slept. He was old and his eyesight had begun to fade. He was not able to see well at night, and now he was having trouble seeing in the daytime. His sons were

often gone on other matters, so I tried to listen for his call in case he needed my help, especially in the night.

I was sleeping that night when I heard my name called. The voice sounded far off but urgent, as if there were a great need in the caller's voice. The caller repeated my name twice, "Samuel, Samuel," just as God had called Abraham, Moses, and Jacob when He called them to service, and it was also how Eli called me when he needed help. I thought it must be Eli calling me for help from his quarters, so I ran there and when I arrived, I cried out "Henenie" or "Here I am, for you called for me." This is how I had been taught to respond as a servant of Adonai. I think I woke Eli up. He seemed startled as if awakened from a deep sleep. He was kind to me even though I had disturbed his rest and told me that he had not called me and to go back and lie down. I went back to the main room. The light was still burning, dawn was some hours away. I lay down and tried to drift off to sleep. I was certain that I had heard someone call. Who else besides Eli would call? He and I were the only ones in the temple as his sons had not come back that night.

I had not been lying there long when I heard the call in the distance again, "Samuel." As before, I got up and hurried to Eli and responded as I did before, "Henenie" or "Here I am." I don't think Eli had gone back to sleep. When I came this time, he was again kind and called me son, telling me that he had not called and to go back and lie down again. I guess he thought I was having bad dreams and needed compassion and encouragement. He did not often call me son. I returned to the temple and lay down as before. Sometimes when I sleep in the temple, the room seems large and strange. At those times, I am glad for the light that is left burning there. At night in that large room, it can seem as if someone else is in the room, but the light keeps the dark away and allows me to see that I am alone in the temple. I remember thinking as I lay down that this might be a night that I would not sleep.

As I lay there, the voice came again from some distant place. This time I thought it must be Eli, so I jumped up and went to him. And when I got to him, I responded to him as Abraham did when God called him to service, "Heniene, Here I am, for you have called." This time Eli paused before he sent me away, and just as I thought that he might be going to tell me that it was he calling or maybe chastise me for waking him, instead he told me something that changed my life. He looked at me for a moment as if sizing me up, and then said to go back and lie down again as before, but he added these words. He said if he calls to say, "Speak, Adonai, for your

servant is listening.” I had never been told those words before, nor heard them used in the temple, yet Eli knew them and told them to me. I went back to my place in the temple and lay down. I was not at all sleepy now. I was wondering why Eli told me to say those words if I heard him call. Who did Eli think was calling? Was Eli testing me in some way? Why did he pause before he spoke those words to me? I was anxious for the coming of the dawn. So, I lay down and was grateful that the light had not yet gone out. I kept thinking, “Who was Eli talking about when he said ‘he’? Who is ‘he’?”

I lay there turning those thoughts over in my mind wondering, and then I heard my name called, “Samuel! Samuel!” This was not the way I had heard this voice call me before, calling from some distant place. This voice was close as if it was right beside me, present with me in the room. I would like to say that I used all of my will and courage to lie on the mat and stay there, but I don’t think I could have moved. This was not some far off voice calling me to come and serve. This was not Eli’s voice. This voice came from another one present with me in the temple. This must be Adonai. I spoke the words that Eli had told me, new words for one who served before Adonai in the temple, “Speak, Adonai, for your servant is listening.” And in that moment, I listened not just with my ears but with all of my heart, soul, and mind. With all that was in me, I sought to hear the response from the other one present in the temple. I thirsted to hear the words of Adonai.

There was no introduction, no dialogue, no strange glow in the room or any manifestation, just words that came to my mind as speech comes from someone close. The words came and I listened and listened. Adonai gave me words about Eli and his family and what He was planning to do to them. They were difficult words for me to hear, words that made my ears tingle not with joy, but with the realization of the pain they held for Eli and his family. Then the words stopped, and I was alone in the temple, except now I had heard the words of Adonai. What was I to do with such words? How could I tell them to Eli? They were words that informed me, but also transformed me from someone who served before Adonai to someone who had heard His voice, who had heard His call. I lay there until dawn. The lamp of the Lord went out. It was time to open the doors of the temple. So, I got up, and began to serve Adonai as I had always done and opened the doors to let the light of a new day into the temple.

Eli must have been awake as well. He called to me as soon as the sound of the doors opening ended. Eli called me, and I went to him, not running but quickly, though with

reluctance, for the fear of the message for Eli was great on my mind. When I got to him, he said, “Samuel, my son” and I replied to him as a servant to his master, “Henine, Here I am.” Eli asked me what Adonai had told me, and I was afraid to speak the words of Adonai to him. And that morning, Eli taught me another lesson that I have not forgotten. He taught me that if I did not share the words of Adonai with those they were given to, then I was subject to the consequences that were found in Adonai’s words for that person or people. I told Eli every word then, as I have done to this day with all of the words of Adonai for His people. Eli listened. He heard the words I shared. He became informed by the words I repeated to him, and as I spoke, hope rose up in me that he would be transformed by Adonai’s words and then act to correct what he was doing and letting his sons do that offended Adonai. Eli did not get angry with me. He listened to the words of God that I told him. He was now informed of what God was going to do, but he did not let God’s word transform him. He did not repent and seek to turn to Adonai. He did not plan to try to restrain his sons nor do anything different. He just accepted the words and continued as if that was his only choice, as if he had no control in what was to occur in his life. That was the last lesson I learned from Eli, and it is the most difficult lesson he taught me. He had shown me how to respond to the call of Adonai to be a prophet and to listen for Adonai’s words and to speak them faithfully to those for whom they were intended. Adonai gives His words to inform and transform people. Some are able to hear the words of Adonai and be those who are informed and transformed, and others like Eli are only informed, but not transformed. I learned from Eli to let nothing I was told by Adonai not be given to those for whom God’s words were sent. And from that day until now, I have let none of God’s words fall to the ground.

God’s words are true, and Adonai’s message to Eli came true, Eli did not heed the warning Adonai gave him. In time, Eli and his sons died, and I was left alone at Shiloh before Adonai. When Eli’s sons were killed, the ark of Adonai was taken from them to a foreign land, and it took time for it to be restored to the people of Israel. But even with the ark gone, Adonai continued to appear to me. Through His word, Adonai revealed Himself to me and I have grown to know His word, and through His word, I have begun to know Adonai, no longer serving before Him but seeking to listen to His words and be transformed by them. Eli had taught me many things, not only to act when called, but to listen with all of my soul, to thirst for Adonai’s words, to let them not only inform me, but transform me into one who has a deeper relationship with the revealed God who all can know through His word. Eli also taught me that many people

will listen to God's words, but few will be transformed by what they hear. It is a lesson that I carry with me to this day, and it is my hope and prayer that people will listen to the words that come from Adonai and be informed and transformed by them. From that day, when Adonai called me, I have tried to listen and hold onto His word. I seek only to be one whose reply to Adonai's call is always, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening," and then when I hear His words, to be one who goes where He sends and delivers His message, letting none of His words fall to the ground, and being transformed by His words.

That is the essence of what I have learned as a prophet: seek the word of Adonai, listen carefully when you hear it, hold Adonai's word in our hearts and let them transform us all into a people who are like those revealed through His word.

Pray with me: Lord, come and do a new work in us. Let us be informed by your words we hear, and then transformed by your steadfast love into your people. Lord, help us to be heralds of the great good news that steadfast love has come for us all. Open our ears to hear your call. Let our response be always, "Speak, Adonai, for your servant is listening," and then open our hearts to hold fast to your word and not just be informed, but transformed into a people of God. Amen