

# Second Sunday After Epiphany

3Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

2At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 3the 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. 4Then the Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' and he said, 'Here I am!' 5and 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. 6The 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.' 7Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 8The 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. 9Therefore 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.

10Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.' 11Then 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. 12On that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 13For 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. 14Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall

not be expiated by sacrifice or offering for ever.'

15Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. 16But Eli called Samuel and said, 'Samuel, my son.' He said, 'Here I am.' 17Eli 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 he told you.' 18So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, 'It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.'

19As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. 20And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Falling in Ones Calling**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Corruption in the Priesthood*

In order to understand this text some background is needed. Eli was the priest (of the Law) overseeing the offerings that the people of Israel owed God and brought to God at Shiloh. In more contemporary terms, this priesthood was his vocation, his daily work, the location of his regular calling. Eli viewed it as a trust given to him and his family by God. Therefore, he employed in the exercise of his vocation his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. But as the text reveals, they "were scoundrels" (2:12); they skimmed off the top the choice parts of the offerings designated for God and kept it for themselves. When Eli heard of their corruption and confronted his sons about it, they would not listen (1:25). Eli's response was simply to let the practice go on (2:29), meaning that he too is now wrapped up in the corruption of his sons.

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Honoring His Sons More than God***

But as the situation unfolds we see that Eli's problem is not only one of entanglement in outward corruption. When Eli is himself confronted by a "man of God" (2:27) about all of this, we find out that he also has a corrupt heart. "Eli," the man declares, you "honor your sons more than [God] by fattening yourself on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel" (2:29).

## **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Priesthood (Calling) Lost***

As a result, the very God who called Eli and his sons and placed them in charge of overseeing the exercise of God's Law with regard to God's people (the exercise of God's justice over what is God's own), now executes justice against Eli and his sons. Eli's two sons "shall die on the same day" and Eli will be allowed to continue to stand at the altar for the rest of his days only to "weep out his eyes and grieve his heart" in the knowledge that "all the members of his household shall die by the sword" (2:34). The Priesthood, the place or office to which Eli was called to serve God, turns out to be the place where he has his falling out with God.

## **PROGNOSIS: Rising in a New Calling**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The New Priesthood (Calling)***

Today's text begins with the words: "Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli" (3:1). With those words a faint echo of hope enters into Eli's situation. For Samuel is a "nazirite" (1:1), one who is consecrated to the Lord, whom God has placed into Eli's life to speak a word of the Lord that has been "rare in those day" (3:1). That rare word, I suggest, is not the word of Law which has saturated Eli's life but the word

of Promise echoed in the prayer of the boy's mother, Hannah, after he is born: "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up" (2:6). Through the Promise even sinners like Eli can be raised up, but only after they have been brought down. All this, I also suggest foreshadows the death and resurrection of Jesus. For Jesus is the power in a New Priesthood; he is the Promise in the rare Word that Samuel will speak; Christ is the New Thing in the call to ministry that is issued to Samuel. Samuel ministers to the Lord, not by managing people's offerings, but by interceding for the people before God (cf. 7:5), by making it know that the Lord can restore back to himself those who have sinned against him. As the first of the prophets, the possibility of a "return to the Lord" for those who have turned away is his central message.

#### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Honoring God's Call***

Even so, the big challenge Samuel faced was whether or not to honor this calling from God. For this calling from God entailed Samuel making known to Eli just how severe God's punishment would befall his house. (In other words, all that is said above in the Diagnosis is true!) At first, Samuel is afraid to tell Eli that he knows of God's judgment against him. Samuel essentially finds himself caught between honoring God and honoring Eli, the same kind of dilemma Eli found himself in with regard to God and his own sons. But here a strange thing happens: Eli now ministers to Samuel. Eli tells Samuel, "Do not hide [the bad news] from me. May God so do to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that [God] told you" (3:17). Eli, unlike his sons, is now able to listen. He has faith in the Promise, a faith that gives him the ability to face up to his wrongdoing and to truly honor God. Correspondingly, Samuel is also strengthened in faith. For he too is able to truly honor God by telling Eli all that God had told him. Through the Word

of Promise, both Eli and Samuel receive the gift of a faith that truly honors God.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : A Trustworthy Prophet**

The daily life outcome of all this is that Samuel remains faithful to his calling and becomes a trustworthy prophet. The last two verses of the text capture what this means with eloquent simplicity: “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” (3:19-20). For details, read through 1 Samuel 25:1. If you do, you will encounter a fascinating account of he who has been called Israel’s first “prophet,” in the vocational sense of the term.