

A Call in the Night

Our Hebrew Scripture passage today is about the in-breaking of light and justice. The days when the boy Samuel served in the house of God were evil. The high priest was Eli and his sons were corrupt. In the previous chapter we read, “Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for God or for the duties of the priests to the people.”

They were stealing from the offerings. They were demanding more and more and more from the working class people. They were sleeping with the women who served in the courtyard and while scripture doesn't use this language, it seems clear it was not consensual. It probably didn't feel like an evil time to Eli's sons. They were skimming off the top and living in luxury. They were sexually assaulting women who worked for them without any consequence. They were at the top of the priestly caste and they took full advantage of their power and privilege.

Eli spoke to his sons and asked them to stop. When this didn't work, he just shrugged his shoulders and took comfort that at least he wasn't participating in their evil and corruption and violence. And so Eli went about his usual business in the temple, pretending it wasn't happening, imagining that he didn't have the power to stand up against it, ignoring the very real pain and suffering his family was causing, maintaining the systems and structures that protected and maintained the privilege that his sons and he had. Eli was not the perpetrator but he was a complicit bystander. He didn't make a stand for the vulnerable.

Also living in the home of Eli was Samuel. Maybe you remember how Samuel came to live with a priest. His mother Hannah had been barren and had prayed to God for a child and promised God that if she was blessed to have a child, she would send him to be raised in the temple. So around the age of four, Samuel was sent to the tabernacle to serve under Eli the priest.

So Samuel is there living among all this drama and it was into this evil and this apathy that God gave Samuel a message to declare, “Time is up. Eli and sons, your time is up. A new day is on the horizon!

This message came to Samuel in the middle of the night. You know that feeling when the phone rings in the middle of the night – jolting you out of sleep, mentally scrolling through which loved ones are traveling, who might be sick, imagining what could have gone wrong.

Here in Detroit, I assume the worst if the phone rings after 9:00. In other places, it might take a midnight call to get the adrenaline flowing. Samuel wakes up, pulse racing, at the sound of a voice urgently calling his name – “Samuel, Samuel!” The boy assumes it is his mentor, Eli and runs into his room. Eli says, “I did not call you, my son, go and lie down.” God calls again, Samuel runs to Eli again, and again, Eli sends him back to bed.

The third time, Eli realizes what is going on. Eli, the old priest, unwilling or unable to stand in solidarity with his people, discerns that it is God speaking to Samuel. This time, he sends Samuel back with instructions on how to respond.

So Samuel goes back to his room. God calls his name and Samuel responds, “Speak, God for your servant is listening.” And God says, “Time is up. A new day is on the horizon for Israel. I am about to do something that will make the ears of anyone who hears it tingle. Time is up for the sons of Eli. Time is up for Eli, who allowed their behavior to go unchecked. It is time for a new voice. It is time for an end to injustice. The light is dawning.”

Samuel lay awake all night. I mean, how could he go to sleep after that. He was awake! And he was afraid. He was going to have to deliver this difficult message to Eli. It turns out that listening to God is dangerous. It would be much easier for Samuel to stick to the routine – sweep the temple, light the lamps, straighten the pews, stay in his lane. Listening to God means speaking truth to power, standing in solidarity with the vulnerable and the marginalized, creating tension, bracing yourself for conflict.

I think this is an appropriate story for the weekend that we celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. Like Samuel, Dr. King had a call in the night. Like Samuel, he found that listening to God was dangerous. In January of 1956, when Martin was 27 years old and had been leading the Montgomery bus boycott, he received yet another threatening phone call. This one touched a nerve and left him shaken. He sat in his kitchen at midnight and prayed, “Lord, I’m down here, trying to do what’s right, but I must confess, I’m losing my courage.

King later explained what happened next. He said, “I could hear an inner voice saying to me, “Martin Luther, stand up for truth. Stand up for justice. Stand up for righteousness.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. stood up to the perpetrators of racism and violence and inequity – the sons of Eli. But he also stood up to the bystanders – the Elises. In his letter from a Birmingham Jail, King responded to clergy who were urging him to stand down.

He wrote: “I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direction action”; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a “more convenient season.”

King went on to say, “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.”

Time is up. A new day is on the horizon. Time to examine the ways we tacitly support racist structures and policies. Time to fight for equity. Time to fight for the voting rights act! Time to reject policies that rob and poor and line the pockets of the rich. Time to hold perpetrators of violence against women to account. Time to welcome strangers from Haiti and Africa and Syria and Afghanistan and Central America. Time to feed the hungry. Time to care for the sick. Time to visit the prisoners. Time to end the gross injustices of mass incarceration and police brutality. Time to ensure there is clean water for all the children of the world. The time is always ripe to do right. The time to speak up is here.

Are we Samuel in this story? Or are we Eli? Samuel is young, inexperienced, open-hearted and brave. Eli is old and fearful and protective. He has stood silent for years.

And yet.....Eli is the one who helps Samuel discern the call of God – even though it threatens his own security. Eli, God bless him, encourages Samuel to speak his truth, even though he knows the message will turn his world upside down and strip him of power. Are we Samuel or Eli, or are we a little bit of both.

God is still speaking. God calls each and every one of us, young and old. Wakes us from our slumber. Opens our eyes to the new day dawning. Calls us to stand up for truth, stand up for justice, stand up for righteousness. May we listen to that dangerous voice, calling us to side with the poor, the vulnerable, and the oppressed. May we listen to the call to follow Jesus in the way of love, the way of welcoming the stranger, the way of standing with the disenfranchised. May we, like Samuel, stay awake all through the night and speak truth to power in the morning. May we, like Eli, encourage our young people to follow God's call, even when their voices will shatter our complacency. May we, like Eli, realize that it is never too late to do the right thing. Time is up. A new day is on the horizon. Thanks be to God! Amen.