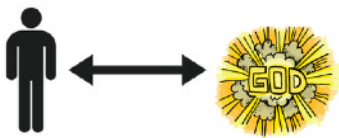


What's the Point?

A sermon on 1 Samuel 3:1-21

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

I'd like to focus in on the reading about the call of Samuel this morning.
The first half of the story is usually all that is covered in children's Sunday School
- stopping at the point when Samuel finally says "Speak Lord, your servant is listening."
Up to that point it is a really fun little story.



At a time in which God seemed more distant
- direct encounters with God, visions, were rare,
the tales of such things becoming mere tales.

Little Samuel, possibly twelve years old, is sleeping in a temple at Shiloh.

Samuel was a temple servant, given by his parents for the service of God.

This position meant that he lived in the temple, guarded it,

but also importantly assisted with the rituals and sacrifices.

(This is before the first temple is built in Jerusalem, but performed a similar function.)

We are told that this Temple is where the ark of the covenant was being kept.

Samuel and Eli likely each had their own side chambers that they would sleep in
- most scholars find it unlikely that Samuel would have slept right next to the ark,
- but he was certainly within earshot.



Then we get this comical scene of the voice calling "Samuel, Samuel,"
and Samuel, being the model of obedience, runs to Eli,
... only to be shoed back to bed.



After repeating this dance a couple more times,
Eli figures out that maybe it is the Lord who is calling the boy
- it's a good thing God gives second chances.

In this case it is a fourth chance, when in verse 10
"the Lord came and stood and called as before 'Samuel, Samuel!'"

What's the Point?



Traditionally, this Lord who comes and stands there has been understood by Christians to be Jesus
- time traveling before it was cool.
If that is too weird for you that's fine,
but I think it's kind of cool to think about Jesus showing up
about a thousand years before he was born to chat with Samuel.

But this is where the tone of the story shifts.
Let me explain some back story:

Eli was the priest of the temple/shrine at a place called Shiloh.
He seems to have served diligently, but his sons took a ... "different approach"
to the priesthood that they were inheriting from their aging father.
Hophni and Phineas - those were their names -
were taking the best parts of the sacrifices people were offering for themselves instead of for God,
even bribing and threatening the offerers for an even larger share.
There's also some suggestion from later traditions that they were big fans of adultery and rape.



Earlier in the book of 1 Samuel we are told that a prophet visited Eli
and told him that God wasn't a fan of what Hophni and Phineas were up to
and that this would result in a curse on his house
- that these two sons would die on the same day.
This is all information that Eli knew *prior* to Samuel's vision.

So, why give Samuel the vision?
Why bother getting a repeat warning to Eli?
What's the point of these messages from God at all?
Maybe we can even broaden that question to why we care about any of what's in scripture.

Maybe in this case it is just so that we know
to interpret the death of Eli's sons as divine punishment for their wickedness.
Maybe there is more going on.
But it hard to know how it is we are to interpret God's words and what to do about it.

Well, there's Eli's approach, let's start there.
Upon prying the information from Samuel, he says



What's the Point?

“He is the Lord. He will do what seems good to Him.”

This tactic didn't receive a favorable review from the ancient commentaries I like to read. I like how Isaac the Syrian simply puts it, that Eli's response suggests that:

“He loved his sons more than the statutes of the Lord”

It seems Eli may be in the habit of not taking responsibility for others.

Do you remember the oath that Eli says to extract the Lord's words from Samuel?

He said “May God do these things to you and more also

if you hid anything from me of what He said to you.”

Similar phrasing occurs twelve times

throughout the historical books of the Old Testament.

But this one is different from the others.

The standard formula is “May God do these things to me and more also,

if I don't ... whatever I'm promising to do”

What “things” is unclear - it seems a generic “or else” type of thing.

For Eli to threaten Samuel with what is usually a self-directed curse is certainly a choice.

Perhaps we might think that it is acceptable to not take responsibility for the actions of others, but certain positions, such as Eli's being a father and a priest, and the seriousness of his sons' crimes - who again, are also supposed to be priests - it is at least in part his duty to do *something*.



There's a book, *Master and Apprentice*, one of the best fictional grappings with prophesy, messages/truths revealed to specific individuals by God (or the Force - it is a Star Wars book).

At the time this book takes place,

the most common approach to prophesy is something like Eli's fatalistic comment to Samuel:

the Force will do what the Force is going to do.

Essentially treating the information as:

- A) impossible to interpret, and
- B) irrelevant because there is nothing to be done.

There was much talk of “it's just a metaphor”

What's the Point?

One character, who would eventually succumb to the Dark Side and become evil,
found in studying prophecy the need to control the future.

Not accepting the “God’s gonna do what God’s gonna do,”
but either trying to bring the promised results about himself
or doing everything he can to prevent such prophecies from ever being fulfilled.
Such a temptation to play at *being* God, er, the Force.

This Jedi explains how

The ancient [Jedi] mystics sought undue knowledge of the future.
It led them down dangerous paths.
Those drawn too deeply into them were often...were tempted by the dark side.
That is why we study prophecy no longer.

and later on:

The desire to know the future sprang from a desire to control the future.
The desire to control the future sprang from fear
—the fear of the depthless pain and loss the future might hold



But there’s still the problem of what one is supposed to do.

If God doesn’t want us to try to grasp control,
why bother imparting that information to mere mortals at all?



In the book of Jonah this becomes a sore point.
The reason the prophet Jonah didn’t want to go to Ninevah as he had been told,
and instead took a side trip inside a big fish,
was that he knew that God wanted him to go for a reason.
So that the people of that city would repent.

Jonah may have preferred that God simply render his judgement,
do some smiting, blot evildoers from the face of the earth.
But he gave them warning so they would repent.

They did.

God forgave them.

Jonah got mad.

This is not a sermon on Jonah, but it does give us a partial answer.

God tells those who will listen what often seem harsh truths
in hopes the wrongdoers will stop with their doing wrong.

What's the Point?

Maybe Eli should have tried removing his sons from the priesthood and appointed others.
Maybe he should have seen that repay those they've cheated.
We don't know because the scriptures don't tell us.
Instead we are shown what comes of Eli's "God's gonna do what God's gonna do" -

I asked Carolyn to read verse 21, finishing out the chapter
even though the lectionary stopped short of that verse.
(It stopped short because it sets up the next act of the saga),
but it is a good summation of how things proceeded.
In most Bibles, we read in this verse that all Israel believed Samuel to be a prophet.
The Greek translation adds another important tidbit:
Eli was an exceedingly old man, and his sons continued living as they did.
And their way was evil before the Lord.

So, what does this long ago story and all this talk of prophesy and visions of God
have to do with us today?

God may do whatever God is going to do,
but remember that what God does is for good, and not for evil,
what he does is for our salvation - what he does is calls people to repentance,
and to renewed relationship with God, with each other.
God may call us to accept what he is doing in the world,
even without entirely understand what that is,
but in doing so, he asks for our cooperation,
trusting that "All things work together for good with those who love God,
who are called according to his purpose."
and that whatever plans he has for us are ones ultimately of hope.



*Now to the One
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.*