

## Speak, Lord

TEXT: 1 Samuel 3:1-21

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on May 25, 2025*

This story, of the young Samuel hearing God calling him in the night, is one of the most famous stories in the Bible; and it's standard Sunday School fare, because it involves a faithful child. In the refrain of the hymn "Here I am, Lord," the line, "Here I am, Lord, ... I have heard you calling in the night" is a nod to this story.

I first came across this story at home, well before it was taught in Sunday School. I don't remember if I read it on my own or if my mother read it to me, but the story had an immediate effect. From it, I learned several things:

1. Children could do religious jobs—Samuel, as a boy, was doing ministry under Eli's tutelage.
2. Within that broad task, God might call children to do particular things—God calls out to Samuel to deliver a very specific message to Eli.
3. It can be easy to mistake God's voice for someone else, if you aren't expecting it.

So, from the minute I learned about that story, I went to bed every night expecting it. As I've told you before, I was a very religious child—something explicitly fostered by my mother, who prayed and sang hymns with me before bed every night.

But then, after she left the room and before I went to sleep, I finished my own prayer with what Eli taught Samuel. I said, every night, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." I kept up that practice for years; and the understanding that God had work for even children to do burrowed deep in my psyche and never left.

I might not have been so eager to hear God's calling as a child, had I paid more attention to the actual thing God asked Samuel to do, which was to go and tell Eli, who was the closest thing Samuel had to a father, that God was going to punish Eli and his descendants forever. "Great first assignment!"

Samuel is a pivotal figure in the Old Testament and the arc of his life has a number of things to teach us about what it means to be called by God and what that looks like from birth to death at a ripe old age, which we don't see often in biblical characters. The story of Abraham begins when he is an adult, and even Jesus only gets to age 33. The only other prophet in the Bible I can think of where we see the full birth-to-old-age arc is Moses.

We'll run into Samuel in his later life when looking at other stories. This week it is the child Samuel where I want to focus, because the first call of God to Samuel serves as a foil to the last call of the priest Eli, who Samuel serves. Seeing them together has a few things to teach us about what calls are and are not.

For the particular story of God calling the boy Samuel, it's important to remember that while the text describes Samuel and Eli as being in the "temple," this is not the temple in Jerusalem. At this point in Israelite history, Jerusalem isn't even under Israelite control. The Philistines have that land and it won't be until after Samuel's death that King David captures Jerusalem; and then it will be David's son, Solomon, who builds the temple there.

When Samuel is born, worship still operates as it did with the Israelites in the wilderness—in an elaborate tent, which contained the holy area where the Ark was kept, called the Tabernacle. That whole setup was designed to travel from place to place, and it did. The holiest place in early Israel was not determined by a fixed geographic location, but by a moveable sacred object—The Ark of the Covenant—an elaborate box that Moses constructed at God's command in the wilderness.

Inside the Ark were relics from the wilderness wanderings, including the tablets of the Ten Commandments, but the Ark of the Covenant was more than a storage container. The top of it was a seat—called the Mercy Seat—which is where God told Moses to sit when he judged the cases brought before him by the Israelites. Moses sat on the Ark, God descended in a cloud and covered it and him and the Tabernacle and told Moses all he needed to know.

With the tablets of the Ten Commandments inside it, those commandments became very literally the seat of the law—the foundation from which everything else was to be decided. In the Ark, Righteousness and Justice were one and the same, and when God met with Moses it was at that intersection.

When we're trying to listen for God's voice in our lives, it will be easiest to hear wherever both righteousness and justice come together. I don't think it was an accident that Samuel heard God's audible voice, about an issue of injustice, as he was sleeping near the Ark. Eli was in another room, which also tells you something.

Once the Israelites crossed into the Promised Land, the Ark moved from town to town, eventually landing in Shiloh, about 30 miles north of Jerusalem. And that's where we first meet Eli in the opening chapter of 1 Samuel.

By law, all priests had to be descended from Moses' brother Aaron. So, Eli himself is an example of an inherited calling. His job was predetermined by his ancestry, and because he is in Shiloh and the Ark is in Shiloh, Eli is the high priest of the time. And, since he serves with the Ark of the Covenant, which has the Mercy Seat, Eli—like Moses—is also the judge of Israel. It's a tribal government still. No king. Eli is quite old when we meet him in chapter one and when he dies in chapter 4, the Bible notes that he has judged Israel for 40 years.

Eli has two sons—Hophni and Phinehas—and since they, too, are descended from Aaron, they, too, are priests in Shiloh. Eli is old with reduced duties, but he's still technically the high priest and Israel's judge. So that's the setting.

But to understand the message from God to Samuel in chapter 3, we need to go back to chapter 1, where the whole chapter revolves around a barren woman named Hannah, who keeps returning to the shrine in Shiloh, the most important shrine in the land, to beg God for a child.

Hannah, praying in great distress, promises God that, if granted a son, she will give him into God's service. She's praying aloud, but Eli is old and can't hear her. He sees her lips moving and that she is upset and assumes she is drunk. He goes to her and says, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." Great guy.

Hannah patiently explains that she is not drunk but in distress, and when she explains her situation, Eli tells her that her prayer will be granted. By the end of the chapter, Hannah has given birth to Samuel and has brought him back to Eli to be raised in God's service as she promised. That was an actual practice—not a one-off with Hannah—and a son dedicated in that way was given when he was weaned, somewhere between ages of 3-5.

By custom, she would see her son just once a year after that, bringing him a new robe each time. Each time she came, Eli would give Hannah and her husband an additional blessing and they went on to have other sons and daughters.

Samuel's father was not descended from Aaron, so Samuel couldn't be a priest; but, like with Eli and his sons, the fact that Samuel was dedicated to God and raised in God's service was a calling made for him by his mother, not one that he consciously chose.

Chapter two is in two parts. The first is a song of thanksgiving to God by Hannah for the gift of Samuel, and if you put that song up next to Mary's Magnificat in Luke, you would be hard-pressed to tell the difference.

The second half of chapter two describes why Eli is in such trouble. The issue is summed up by verse 12, “Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people.” In the description that follows, that charge is illustrated by showing them taking the offerings of the people for themselves. As the account says, “They treated the offerings of the Lord with contempt.”

Hophni and Phinehas were stealing in two ways. The offerings at the time were not money, but animals. But the way the sacrificial system worked was supposed to be a win/win for everybody. Let’s say you bring a sheep. The sheep is ritually slaughtered at the shrine. The fat is burned off as an offering to God, and burning off the fat cooked the meat.

Of the meat itself, 10% then was given to the priests—the tithe—which is how the priests got any food, since they spent all their time tending to worship, didn’t own land, and couldn’t farm or raise animals.

But then the other 90% of the meat went back to whoever brought it, and they either had a feast there at the shrine, or took it home, or a little of both. That’s what we see happening in the first chapter of the book as Hannah’s family brought sacrifices to Shiloh and they all ate there.

We aren’t told when Eli’s sons began their scam, but by the end of chapter two, we learn that Hophni and Phinehas took most of the sacrifice, if not all, for themselves. The fat was not given to God, and the people bringing the sacrifice got nothing or next to nothing of the meat. Which is doubly bad because sacrificial animals were required by law to be the best of the flock.

So, they are taking, not 10%, but 100% of the best cuts of meat from the best animals of everyone who came with sacrifices to the most important shrine in Israel. And the corruption didn’t end there. Eli’s sons were also sleeping with the women who served at the entrance to the tabernacle. Because of course they were.

We’re told in chapter two that Eli chastised his sons for their behavior, but they don’t listen to him. And then someone known only as “a man of God” comes to Eli, implies that Eli is in on the corruption and curses Eli and his family, predicting that this will be the end of his family line and saying that Eli will know what the man of God is saying is true because he will see both of his sons die on the same day.

That has just happened when chapter three opens with God calling to Samuel. As Samuel gets older in later chapters, he becomes known simply as the “man of God,” and I think it’s possible that chapter three is a more detailed account of who the “man of God” is at the end of chapter two and that the condemnation of Eli made by the boy Samuel in chapter three is actually a different telling of the curse given by the man of God in chapter 2. Chronologies in the Bible can jump around like that.

But once that message is delivered by the boy Samuel in chapter three, the chapter ends by telling us, “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 Beersheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD. The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.”

Chapter three is a test of Samuel’s faithfulness to God, and he passes. As we remember Jesus saying that those who are faithful in little will be faithful in much, we see that at work in Samuel going forward. God trusts him with ever harder assignments, and so the people of Israel come to trust him, which proves to be critical for the whole nation down the line.

The opposite is true of Eli. In chapter four, all the curses on Eli and his family come to pass, resulting in the Ark getting captured by the Philistines because Hophni and Phinehas bring it out of Shiloh to the battle, hoping to use its power to win. They are killed together, as predicted. Eli stayed behind in Shiloh and when the news comes that his sons are killed *and* the Ark taken, Eli drops dead.

So, what do we learn from all that? Specifically, what do we learn about calling? The early narratives about Samuel give us a side-by-side example of two life callings in religious vocations—the priesthood, which we see in Eli and his sons, and the prophetic, which we see in Samuel.

In both cases, those vocations were essentially chosen for them before they were even conceived. As descendants of Aaron, Eli and his sons would be priests. They had no other options. The vow taken by Hannah when she asked for a son determined that Samuel would live a life of service to God, but the priesthood was not an option, because he belonged to a different tribe. Prophet was pretty much what was left.

The first verse of 1 Samuel 3 tells us that, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” All that is pretty much the prophet’s job—to receive God’s word, frequently in dreams or visions, and then convey God’s word to the people.

Either God had nothing to say in those days, or people had lost the ability to tune into the right frequency. The religious rituals were being performed, but no one was calling out any messages from God about how things were going; what God expected of people; or how they should live.

In the first three chapters of first Samuel, we find that both Eli and Samuel are tested in their callings. Eli is tested when he discovers the corruption of his sons and Samuel is tested by being asked to confront Eli, the only father he has ever really known, with his failure to pass God’s test. Samuel passes his test and goes on to become one of Israel’s most consequential prophets. Eli fails and God puts an end to both him and his sons.

One underlying message about calling here is that a calling—whether it is something we somehow inherit or something we choose—is not, in and of itself, a guarantee that we will succeed. To be called to do something is not the same as having accomplished it; and even to do the work is no guarantee that we will do it in the way or in the spirit God intended. See Jonah from last week. Like baptism, a calling is a beginning, not an end unto itself.

Hophni and Phinehas had an ancestral calling to be priests. But they either did not study God’s commands or chose to ignore them as they took up positions of authority and let it go to their heads—and not just in some minor shrine, but in the Tabernacle where the very presence of God dwelt in the Ark of the Covenant, and the commandments were right there in the box, if they cared to look. They desecrated that sacred space, and the women who also served there, by treating offerings with contempt and harming those they were called to serve for their own gain.

Eli is also a cautionary tale. None of the condemnation of him implies that he ripped people off in his younger years or in any way neglected his duties. But the emphasis on his blindness in the narrative and his inability to hear Hannah’s prayer, matches God’s accusation against him. He turned a blind eye to the actions of his sons, and a deaf ear to God’s complaint and the cries of those he served.

Eli does call out his sons; but, when they don’t listen, he does nothing more. While Eli lived, he was still the High Priest. He had authority over his sons beyond that of a father. He could have stripped them of their duties. He could have refused to eat of the ill-gotten sacrifice. Eli was the judge of all Israel, for heaven’s sake. He could have enforced God’s law with his sons.

But Hannah was not the only one he couldn’t hear. No wonder the word of God was rare in those days. Eli had put God on mute so that he didn’t have to hear about his sons; which meant he didn’t hear anything else either.

Ironically, it’s Eli who teaches Samuel who it is that is calling to him in the night, which tells me that Eli knew God’s voice. His hearing loss was selective. God had likely tried to get Eli’s attention before to do something about his sons. Eli not only knew who was calling Samuel; but I’m guessing he knew what that voice would say.

By contrast, once Samuel is tuned into the voice, the channel is open and stays open. He can download the whole message without Eli’s help. The question is, will Samuel do what God has asked? He was afraid to give the message to Eli, and has to be pressed; but, ultimately, Samuel tells Eli everything. Eli’s response again tells

us that this is not the first time he's heard God's message. All he says is, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

Any kind of calling—whether it is a calling to a lifetime vocation or a calling to do a particular thing in a particular moment—is first a calling to accept an open and trusting relationship with the Caller. It is *not* a guarantee that we can't screw it up. Accepting the call is a vow of sorts to stay on track—to stay in relationship with the one who calls us, and to continue to learn what the calling requires and adjust or repent as needed.

But just because Samuel passes the test of delivering God's message to Eli, he is not therefore ready to march out and lead Israel, any more than I was ready to lead a church when God first called me to preach at age 14. A calling is a beginning, not a fulfillment. But I was only able to hear that vocational call because, long before that, Samuel had taught me to affirm every night "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

The tagline for the United Church of Christ is "God is still speaking." That is the truth; and it has been true since the day God spoke the world into being. God's voice floods the earth in every place and every time; in every language through every form of media. Whether you are looking for your calling for a lifetime, for a new stage of life, or for a particular moment; God is speaking. The calling is there. The offer of trusting relationship is there. Our first step is being willing to listen. Amen.