

“In the Dim Light”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
1 Samuel 3:1-21
October 22, 2017

If you sit in near darkness for awhile, your eyes begin to adjust. Slowly, the light of one lamp begins to feel normal. Eventually, you could forget about the brighter light. If it showed up, it would hurt your eyes.

The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. How many times have I said, or heard a fellow seeker of light say, “I wish God talked to people loudly and clearly, like back in the Old Testament.” But in these days of transition — with Eli and his family keeping watch over the religious life of Israel from Shiloh — they were feeling the same way. Life was going on. There were good days and bad days. But the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread and Eli’s eyesight had started to grow dim, so even if some vibration in time or space had sought to alert him that there was holiness afoot, he couldn’t have seen it.

It’s nighttime in Israel. It’s the witching hour. There’s an uneasiness among the people. I didn’t get to go for totality during the eclipse back in August. But, even here, I remember stepping into my back yard and thinking “This is weird. Everything’s a bit dimmer. It feels like I’m wearing sunglasses.”

Eclipse or not, there have been far too many days recently when the world has seemed less bright and the word of God has felt rare and I wondered if our vision has grown dim. Whatever your politics, your theology, or your level of cynicism, I wonder if you have felt it too. You know you have if you’ve ever rested your head upon a pillow and said to the ceiling, “Are we going to be okay?”

Eli was in his room and the scripture tells us that the lamp of God had not yet gone out. That’s supposed to let us know that it’s deep into the night, when the lamp was almost out of oil, but not quite yet. It’s literary mood lighting. But it’s also a theological statement: *the lamp of God had not yet gone out.*

Into this space of dimness-but-not-complete-darkness comes a voice: “Samuel! Samuel!” Twice Samuel goes to Eli, and twice Eli tells him to go back to bed. It’s after the third call that we realize that old Eli isn’t quite as unable to see as we thought. And he tells Samuel how to address God.

Speak, for your servant is listening.

We call this story “The Call of Samuel,” but we could just as easily call it “The Un-call of Eli.” Samuel’s first task as a called prophet of God is to speak God’s justice against his mentor. Eli and his sons have made a mess of things. The sons have been dragging God’s name through the mud, taking what’s not theirs and objectifying women. *The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.*

Eli did nothing about it. He knew this judgment was coming, and so when Samuel hesitates to deliver God's message, Eli tells him "Do not hide it from me."

In the dim light, God raises up a new generation. A new prophet to speak to the people. A new hope. A new light. And in the dim light, Eli sees that light, and receives it, and allows it to shine.

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus offers his closing words to the remaining disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

A dimly lit world still contains light. The lamp of God has not yet gone out. The Word of God promises to be with us, always, to the end of the age. As we toss and turn and then wake up and anxiously check the news on our phones out of the corners of our eyes to see what fresh chaos has erupted, our eyes might accidentally catch some light.

We might overhear a child's prayer in their bedroom. We might enter a church building on a Tuesday evening to pick up a file, and hear the most incredible voices singing. We might discover that a high schooler we know is the most creative artist, or the most passionate actor, or the hardest-working athlete, or the funniest writer we know. We might encounter a question from a kindergartner that makes us hunger for such curiosity.

And we might find a little baby who has yet to tell us what her dreams are, what her passion is, what the word of God means to her. Yet, somehow, we know her. We know that she is beloved by her mom and her dad and all those that surround her and that her new church family is going to make some promises — some serious promises — and that she is a beloved child of God.

This congregation is privileged to be the home to a bunch of kids — children and youth who do a great job speaking a prophetic word to us in their songs and questions and absolute demand for honesty and bravery in the face of a cynical and dimly lit world. And today, we are blessed with the presence and the gifts of *Una Voce*. And on top of all that, in just a few moments we will enact the sign of God's unending love and grace and welcome in the baptism of Rose Clare Jesse.

It is clear — I can see it! — that God has spoken in the night and called forth light for the world. Ah, but for every Samuel, there is an Eli. We who have helped make the mess, who have helped turn down the light, we must be prepared to hear what the next generation has heard from God.

Whether you are seven, seventeen, thirty-seven, or seventy-seven, you are Samuel to some, and Eli to others. You are charged with hearing God's call, especially when the lights are flickering and the shadows are dancing. And you are charged with responding to that call and saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

And then comes the hard part, speaking that message to those who have come before you. It might be “well done!” or “thank you!” — but even those can be uncomfortable sometimes. And then the message might be “some things needs to change around here” or “I have an idea” or “You have loved well. But there are some you have failed to love.”

You are also charged with listening. This might be news to some of us, but is highly unlikely that you, in Birmingham, Alabama in the fall of 2017, have it all figured out. When you are Eli, remember what it was like to be Samuel. And so listen, for the word spoken to you is not only the word of a younger person whose diaper you might have changed and who once got something stuck in their nose — it is also the word of God.

Sams and Elis, the nighttime can be spooky and unnerving and the last thing you might want to hear is a voice calling your name, or worse — the name of one younger than you. But this is how our God works, in dim light, calling forth new things: a more just and loving world, a more creative existence, a more life-giving relationship. Be not afraid, for the Word of God is with us, always, to the end of the age.