1 Samuel 3:1-20

January 14, 2018

Here I am Lord. This hymn is not actually all that old, but it has been sung so many times in my life, it feels like it is. It was made in 1981 by Daniel Schutte. Dan Schutte grew up in Wisconsin, near Milwaukee, and became a Priest in the Jesuit order. He was 31 years old when a friend asked him to write a song for an upcoming ordination service. He had four days to write this song. The friend wanted the song to include the images of the Word of God, the light of Christ and the bread and wine. When given this assignment, he had no idea how he was going to work all of this into the song. He had also been suffering with the flu for several days. He sat at his desk with his guitar and a blank sheet of staff paper. He prayed, “God, if I’m going to do this for my friend, you’re going to have to help me.” He turned to words from the prophets, as prophets often expressed doubts about their call from God. Dan brought the song to his friend the night before the service. He had no idea that it would become so popular.

This song has been very controversial. Not as in bad theology but in whether people like it or not. One remarked that she would pay big money never to hear it again in mass. My former coworker Dolly, hates this song. She said it was sung so often at Austin Seminary that she cannot stand to hear it. She calls it the Austin Seminary fight song. So, I made sure that the church sang it one Sunday when she and I were leading worship just so I could see her reaction. Many people love the song, said it reminded them of the struggles while being called by God. A captain serving in Afghanistan said that his troops would gather in a field for Mass and a chaplain would lead them in the song. The captain said “We stand here in this awful place, where we are asked to serve our country but fear for our own lives, and we sing, ‘Here I am, Lord,” My own opinion is that I like the song, but could see how it can be overplayed. It often gets stuck in my head, ask Sara about it. I will change the words and sing it to my dog, saying here I am dog, is it I dog? I have heard you barking in the night.

Regardless if it has been overplayed, it has spoken to many Christians, catholic and protestant. It speaks to how we have heard the voice of God, calling us to various forms of service and ministry. How God gives us the power of our stumbling words. How God uses the simple work of our hands to be grace for people. This song directly relates to our passage today. Here I am.

The story of Samuel begins with his mother, Hannah. She was one of two wives of Elkanah. Elkanah’s other wife had children but Hannah did not. It is obvious in this story that Hannah is the one that is loved, but Peninnah was the second wife. Perhaps he took a second wife since she couldn’t bear children. We think in those days that polygamy was very common. We think of Jacob, Rachel and Leah. It may not have been all that common, but common enough for there to be laws about the process. Hannah being the one that is most loved by her husband causes much jealousy with Peninnah. So Peninnah provokes her, makes fun of her about her barrenness. An especially cruel thing to do to someone struggling with infertility. Year after year she would provoke Hannah. She was known as Hannah’s rival. The Hebrew word for rival is only used for a sister wife. Apparently, rivalry between sister wives in Israel was bad enough that they came up with a word just for that. So whenever they go to the house of the Lord, Hannah would weep, and she would not eat. Elkanah was very concerned and said, “Why do you weep, am I not more to you then ten sons?” Hannah presented herself to the Lord. She prayed that if she would receive a male child, she would set him before God as a nazarite. He would be totally devoted to the Lord. She continued to pray and Eli the priest was watching her. Eli thinks that she is drunk. “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.” “No I am not drunk,” Hannah replies, “I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.” Eli answers, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.” She responds, “Let your servant find favor in your sight.” Hannah goes home and she was sad no longer. She did conceive that son she longed for. He is named Samuel for she asked for him of the Lord.

Later on, we have a fun little scene in chapter 2. Samuel was a little boy and playing priest. Like many children trying to play grown up. When I was a kid, maybe four or five, maybe you would expect me to have been playing pastor. That was not the case. I would stand out at the end of the drive way with a sign that said carwash. But I did not have a car wash set up as people would pull over in their cars. For some reason, I just really wanted to own a car wash. Well that dream died. Hannah made Samuel a little robe and apron that priests would wear. He was learning how to be a priest from Eli. His and his mother’s dreams of priesthood eventually came true.

Fast forward to chapter three. Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. Times were tumultuous. Government was loose, they were governed in little tribal city-states. The city states were devolving. Everyone was doing what is right in their own eyes. Things were out of control because there was no King in Israel. Religious lethargy left the times devoid of a sense of divine activity. The word of the Lord was rare and precious in those days. Visions were not widespread. Religious rituals were steady, but it was more going through the motions. The worship of God was not very spirit filled.

As we saw with Hannah, the story of Samuel does not start here. It starts with Hannah praying and pleading God for a son to be born. She dedicates her son to God’s service and brings this call into motion. Eli is there and he was nearly blind. He is old but still in service to God. The lamp of God had not yet gone out in him. He was still hard at work for the Lord. The scene plays out with a little comedy that Jewish listeners would know. The Lord calls out, “Sam-u-el, Sam-u-el, meaning God has heard. The boy says, Here I am! He runs to Eli which means “my God”. Here I am, you called? Eli says no, I didn’t call go back to bed. The Lord calls once more, Samuel! He runs to Eli again. No not me, go back to bed. The Lord calls another time, Samuel! Samuel had not yet known the Lord and the Word of the Lord had not been revealed to him. There Eli has his aha moment. Maybe God is calling him. Go back to bed and if he calls you say, Speak Lord for your servant is listening and Samuel goes back to bed.

Next instead of just hearing the Lord, Samuel has a vision of the Lord standing before him and calling him again, Samuel, Samuel! He calls back, Speak for your servant is listening. The Lord says, “See I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore, I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.”

Wow. Probably not what Samuel was expecting to hear from the Lord. He was undoubtably excited about the prospect of hearing the word of the Lord for the first time. He had been training with Eli for the priesthood for quite some time. Then he gets this news about his mentor. This is brutal news. He does not want to act on in right away. He lays there unable to sleep. Thinking all night long about what he has to tell Eli. Eli calls him, Samuel my son. Here I am, he replies, not excited about what he has to do. 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. Eli knew that Samuel had heard the voice of God. He knew this was coming. May God do so to you and more also is an oath that is common in the books of Samuel and Kings. The man taking the oath would put the fate of the victim upon himself if he broke his word. Out with it Samuel! So he tells him. Could you imagine having to tell someone you cherish, love and admire that sort of news? This man mentored and basically raised him in the temple. You had to tell him this awful news.

Eli’s two sons have basically stealing from the offering plate. His sons were scoundrels who had no regard for the Lord. When people would offer sacrifices, they would take the best portion of the sacrifice for themselves. They were supposed to wait for the best portions to be offered by the Lord and then feed themselves with the leftovers. Their sins were great in front of the Lord. They would take this portion by force, when their servants would confront people offering sacrifices. They were also having inappropriate sexual relations with women near the temple. Eli did confront his sons and told them what they were doing was wrong. It did no good.

So, Eli heard the news from Samuel. You would expect him to protest this ruling. No, I am not responsible for what my sons have done. I tried to reason with them, but they did not listen. The Father is not responsible for the sins of the sons. Eli had always been seeking and serving a just God. We like to have a God that is adjustable, who is conveniently righteous or variantly just. When we profess to seek a God who is both just and merciful we hope too often not that God’s justice will be tempered by mercy, but that God’s justice is diluted by mercy. A truly just God cannot ignore the claims of justice, though in God’s justice God can be merciful. We see Eli’s own goodness in his humility. It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.

Samuel grows up and the Lord was with him. All of Israel comes to know that he is a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. There is a lot to unpack in the story of Samuel. Much of it is good and much of it is heartbreaking. He received the call of God. He was open to listening. Didn’t quite know what it was, was it a still, small voice? Or was it the booming call of God? He jumped up and found his mentor. Thinking it was him since he was old and infirm. That mentor knew enough that Samuel was being called into service. Admonishing him to keep his ears open.

When we hear the voice of God, it is always best to discern it with someone else. That is exactly what Samuel did. He heard something, but it was not quite clear. When we enlist the help of a friend or our church community it can become much clear. We don’t have to do this alone. Gather your mentors or trusted friends. Help a younger person to see what God is calling them to do in their life.

This story is also a great reminder that the call from God is not always easy. It would have been nice if God called Samuel to proclaim the love of God. I am sure that is part of it, but first he had to tell the truth to his mentor. Eli knew it was coming. His time had come to an end and now the child that he had mentored and groomed was now ready. With this truth telling, it set the scene for Samuel to be trustworthy. He was not going to pull any punches. Sometimes the truth hurts. Sometimes the gospel hurts.

What is God calling you to do? What is God calling us to do? Can we have our ears open to this voice. Whether it is a still small voice or if it is clear as day? Can we proclaim justice just as well as we can proclaim love? Speaking of God’s love without accountability is cheap love. This story is a great reminder of the influences in our lives. Who are our Hannah’s? The ones who prayed fervently for our arrival. Who are our Eli’s? The ones who mentored us and groomed us even when we might take their place. Even when the mentee might have to tell the mentor some hard truths. Friends, it may seem easier just to ignore the call. It is too hard, I am not worthy or whatever excuse we can find. But maybe we can keep our ears open. To hear what will make both ears tingle. That God’s justice and love are among us. Here I am, Lord. Is it I Lord? Amen.