

Epiphany 2 Year B—1 Samuel 3:1-10

Today's Old Testament reading, is a lesson we hear often. Every time we have Ember days we hear it and other times as well. I never tire of hearing it because I recognize Samuel's response to his call. He is slow to get it. Finally his mentor Eli has to explain what to do. When Moses is called, he thinks he isn't qualified because he isn't a good speaker. Jeremiah's excuse is that he is too young. Jonah runs from his call because it is too much to bear the thought of evangelizing his enemies. Probably many of us have also run or at least questioned calls. There is one thing that has struck me when I have heard the stories of people who have joined religious orders. Many questioned their call because they thought they weren't good enough. Nowadays, we don't even have the advantage of an Eli, at least not an Eli that others will recognize as authoritative. Therefore, we have community, and discernment committees, and the Commission on Ministry; many people have to get involved. But Samuel was exemplary in that he kept himself open to the voice. "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Samuel's life began as a contract with God. You will recall that his mother Hannah promised God that if he would give her a child so she could be accepted in the society of her time, she would give the child back to God. She would allow the child to come to Shiloh to live and work in that shrine. When Samuel was old enough to wean, Hannah took him to the tabernacle in Shiloh and turned him over to Eli the priest, that he might become the servant of the Lord. At Shiloh, Samuel slept in the same room as the Ark of the Covenant. The ark was a box-shaped throne of the invisible king Yahweh. Where the Ark was, the Lord was believed to be. It was from the throne that the voice came to Samuel.

From Shiloh, Samuel moved on to become one of the finest characters in the Hebrew Bible. There is less negative said about him than any other major Old Testament character. He became the spiritual leader of his people for over 40 years, presiding over their feasts, interceding for them before God, and serving as judge and arbitrator in practical affairs. "Speak, for your servant is listening," became the pattern for Samuel's whole life.

As Samuel went through life, he, like all of us, had to continue to listen to what God was saying. There was nothing mechanical or automatic about Samuel's religious life. He listened to the people, he listened to what God was saying, and ultimately had to decide for himself at each juncture. An enormous question for Samuel was the institution of judges. The children of Israel had lived for 200 years in Palestine in a loosely organized fashion, with judges as their leaders. A judge was supposed to govern, rescue, deliver, and vindicate. There was a certain pattern in the society of the Hebrews. It began when Israel did evil acts. The result of the evil was that the Lord would give Israel over into the hands of oppressors. Israel would cry out to the Lord for help and the Lord would raise up a deliverer, a judge. The spirit of the Lord was upon the judge, the oppressors were subdued, and the land would be at peace for awhile. When the judge died, Israel would return to its evil ways, and God would have to raise up a new judge.

The system of judges worked well enough for some time, but gradually weakened. At first, there were good judges like Deborah. The last judge was Samson, who started out looking promising, but ended up having much more relationship with Philistine women than with Yahweh. More than that, Israel's enemies, the Philistines, had developed a monarchy and learned to make weapons of war. They threatened to put the Hebrews back into the slave situation they had escaped in Egypt.

The possibility of Israel strengthening its position by moving to a monarchy was raised. As a transitional figure, a monarchy was for Samuel a possible idea beckoning him on. At first, Samuel was offended by the idea. It amounted to a rejection of his own leadership and a departure from the direct dependence on God that had been central to Israel's life. Although Samuel's initial reaction to the idea of a monarchy was negative and conservative, he didn't stop there. He continued to listen, to pray, to ponder and he gradually realized that the simple structure of old was not adequate for the challenge of the present time. So, through genuine struggle, through genuine listening, Samuel is depicted as doing a remarkable thing—he changes his mind.

For me, Samuel is a model for us of wise change, of the ability to listen for what God has to say. Usually, when a change is proposed, there are extremists on both sides. On one extreme are those who refuse to budge an inch from the old ways. On the other are those who see so little of value to conserve that they “throw out the baby with the

bathwater.” Samuel was not an extremist in either direction. He loved the old ways, but saw where history was moving and what had to be done lest everything be lost.

I lived in San Francisco for 15 years. San Francisco is an earthquake prone area. In 1989, there was a major earthquake which did extensive damage to certain parts of the city. One was the Marina, where my parents lived, having recently arrived from Santa Barbara. Fortunately, they were only renting an apartment in the area and were not home when the earthquake struck, because in the earthquake, the apartment went down like a great vertical accordion. By the time my parents, one of my sisters from the convent, and I got to the site days later, the building was plastered with red signs which meant, “Danger. This building will be demolished.” Why so much damage? Primarily because the apartment was built on landfill. Also, it was not flexible enough in its design to sway in a high wind. People and institutions are like buildings. In order to survive the earthquakes of time, we need to be both very firmly rooted and flexible. Like Samuel, we are living in an era of transition. Transition in the larger society, transition in the church, transition in the religious life. Our challenge is to both hold on to the traditions that form the bedrock of religious life and be flexible enough to change with the times. As Samuel bridged the transition between the era of the judges and the era of the monarchy, may we also learn to be wise bridge people. “Speak, for your servant is listening.”