



## Hide and Seek

1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, 23-24

A sermon by William M. Klein

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**1** O Lord, you have searched me and known me. **2** You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. **3** You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. **4** Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. **5** You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. **6** Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it... **13** For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. **14** I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. **15** My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. **16** Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. **17** How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! **18** I try to count them — they are more than the sand; I come to the end — I am still with you... **23** Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. **24** See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Ps. 139:1-6, 13-18, 23-24 NRSV)

**1** Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. **2** At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; **3** the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. **4** Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" **5** and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. **6** The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." **7** Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. **8** The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. **9** Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. **10** Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." **11** Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. **12** On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. **13** 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. **14** Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." **15** Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. **16** But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." **17** Eli said, "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." **18** So Samuel told

him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him." 19 As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. 20 And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. (1 Sam. 3:1-20 NRSV)

1

"It was a dark and stormy night," began the storyteller. We were ten boys at summer camp. It *was* a dark and storm night...thunder cracking, the power flickering, the wind blowing a gale...a perfect setting for a scary story. Our counselor, the storyteller, had us in the palm of his hand.

The writers of 1 Samuel began their story virtually the same way by saying it was an age of deep darkness. "The word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions." It had been a long time since the days of Moses and Joshua who, it seems, heard God's voice on a regular basis.

It was not so much a matter of God no longer speaking. No one was listening. The priestly tribe of the House of Aaron was responsible for seeing to the daily and orderly practice of the faith. They were entrusted with the holiest of tasks - presenting the people's offerings to God...but they were not listening.

The text tells us Eli was the leader of the priestly class. He is portrayed as a fine man save one crucial weakness. He could not keep his sons in line.<sup>1</sup> They were priests, too; Eli's assistants. When the people of Israel brought their offerings and sacrifices to the tabernacle at Shiloh, these sons of Eli used their status as priests to satisfy their own desires. In particular they ate the best portions of the sacrifices instead of offering them to God. They also had their way with the women who had come to worship. These were terrible sins in Israel's moral universe...terrible sins in our moral universe, too... "exhibit A," if you will, that this was an age of deep darkness.<sup>2</sup>

But the text goes on to tell us, "the lamp of God had not yet gone out." There are two ways to understand this statement...one literal and the other metaphorical.

The first has us realize the candles of the golden menorah were always burning in the tent of meeting.<sup>3</sup> It was someone's job to see to it a candle was replaced before it went out. The candles in the menorah never went out...which was a sign God was always present in Israel.

One of young Samuel's daily jobs may have been to make sure the lamp of God never went out. That may have been why he slept in the tent of meeting - to keep an eye on the candles throughout the night. And the very fact that this was an important daily task suggests someone of the priests at least kept the lamp of God alive...if barely flickering.

A second way of understanding what this phrase may have meant is to think of it as a metaphor. It may have been a way of saying: even though it was a dark age in which few people listened for God's voice, there were some who kept a flame of faith alive. The text describes Eli as old and going blind...but as the story unfolds, we find he was the one who recognized God's voice...the one who remembered God's voice well enough to be able to know it when he heard it.

As we think about the lamp of God that had not gone out completely, it may be that both ways of understanding apply...literal and metaphorical. Both certainly help to shed light upon the context and upon what God was about to do.

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The writers of this story, having made it clear this was a dark time, set the stage for God to do a new thing. There is the same sense of expectation we the readers feel when we come to the story of Noah. People were thumbing their noses at God then, too. It was an age of darkness. Noah alone of "all humanity" was righteous. And so through Noah God would make a new beginning.

We can't help thinking ahead to Jesus, too. The Gospels tell us Jesus was born into a dark age...an age of corruption from within the ranks of those responsible for guiding the people in the way of faith. Their way had been lost...which meant they led the people astray. And so through Jesus God would do a new thing, make a new beginning.

The story of Samuel has the same feeling. Through this young man God would plot a new course, make a new beginning. The teller of the story wanted to be crystal clear: God was at work here.

Samuel, perhaps a teenager by this point, was awakened in the night by a voice calling his name.<sup>4</sup> "Samuel, Samuel," the voice called. Assuming it must be the voice of Eli, his teacher, he rose from sleep and ran to Eli and said, "You called me; here I am." But Eli had not called him...so Samuel returned to his bed. A second time he was awakened from sleep by a voice calling his name. Again he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am." But again Eli said, "I did not call; go lie back down." The Lord called Samuel a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

Old Eli may have been nearly blind...but he *saw* well enough to realize what was taking place. The Lord was calling the boy. So Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you again, you shall say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

And Samuel did as Eli instructed...assuming that if the voice called again, it would be God's voice. Eli had said so. And the voice spoke a fourth time. The Lord came and stood there in the tent of meeting and called to him as before, saying, "Samuel! Samuel!" This time Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

This story served two purposes. The first was to introduce Samuel to the voice of God. The second purpose was to tell Israel that while the word of the Lord was rare in those days...the lamp of God had not yet gone out. God in fact spoke to Samuel. The word Samuel heard was in fact from God. Eli, the priest in charge at Shiloh, where the ark of the covenant was kept, had said so.

3

After God spoke to Samuel and Samuel heard what God had to say, Samuel tossed and turned the rest of the night. The message was a disturbing, disruptive, course-altering judgment against his teacher Eli, his family, and the whole tribe of Aaron God had established during the Exodus as the priests for Israel. How could he tell Eli what God had said?

At morning light, as was part of his daily work, Samuel opened the doors to the house of the Lord. Eli was already awake and waiting for Samuel. I suspect the old priest had not slept another wink either. He knew it was the Lord who wanted a word with

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Samuel. And, no doubt, Eli guessed that word had to do with a stern warning God had already given the old priest.<sup>5</sup> So Eli wanted to know what God had said.

"Samuel, my son," said Eli...and Samuel replied, "Here I am." Eli said, "What was it the Lord 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."

So Samuel told it all...from start to finish. Indeed, in days of old God had chosen the tribe of Aaron to be the priests for all of Israel. But Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, and the rest of priests were so disgraceful that God had chosen to change course. God would choose a new priest – one not of the priestly line – to be God's prophet and priest. Eli and his family would be cut off, wiped out.

You and I expect Eli to be angry with Samuel. The bearer of bad news often pays a terrible price. But not here. Eli affirmed what Samuel had heard, saying, "This message is from the Lord; let God do what seems good to God." It was Eli's way of yielding to the new course God was taking – the new future God was charting through this new prophet, Samuel. The torch was passed...and everyone in Israel was to understand this was God's doing.

The story began by saying, "the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions." As the story ends that has changed. Samuel, the new prophet, hears and sees... and the people were to hear God's voice in everything he said.

4

What are we to do with this story? What are we to make of it and learn from it? In my own mind I have tried to ponder this story from a number of points of view. I've put myself in Samuel's shoes, Eli's shoes, in Hophni and Phinehas' shoes, and in the shoes of the Israelites. There is something to be learned from standing in each pair of shoes...and I encourage you to do so.

At the end of the day, though, I think this is a story from which we learn something about God. Stated succinctly, though ours is a dark age, too, **God's voice is not rare**. God does not play hide-and-seek with us. If we do not hear God's voice then our ears do not hear and our eyes do not see. St. Benedict in the 6<sup>th</sup> century wrote, "Listen, my child...with the ear of your heart."<sup>6</sup> St. Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12<sup>th</sup> century wrote, "You wish to see? Listen. Hearing is a step toward vision."<sup>7</sup>

God may not speak to us by way of a voice from the sky – calling us specifically by name, telling us to do this or that. That type of hearing is extremely rare. But God surely speaks in our own day through people, events, things we read, music, art, and the imagination of our hearts and minds. If and when we pay attention, what God's voice calls us to is a posture of listening and watching God "make all things new."

At times God's new thing will judge us and correct us. At times it will comfort and encourage us. At times it will empower us to do what is right even though the cost may be great. At all times, having seen with the heart, mind, and ear, we will be invited to follow where our Lord leads...all the while listening for what God may say next.

It would be well for us to let the psalmist's prayer become our prayer: "You have searched me and known me, O God... You know me inside and out... Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely... Even the darkness is not dark to you...for to you darkness is as light... So search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my

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thoughts. Where you find wickedness in me, show me how to remove it so I may hear you as you lead me in the way of lasting life." Amen.



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### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> See 1 Samuel 2:12-17.

<sup>2</sup> Bartlett, Susan A., Gouwens, Sharon I., O'Callaghan, Catherine, and Spradling, Grant, editors. 1996. Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource. Vol. 3. Cleveland: United Church Press, 243. Citing article by Richard Boyce.

<sup>3</sup> Van Harn, Roger E. 2001. The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts – The Old Testament and Acts. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 173.

<sup>4</sup> While 1 Samuel 3:1 calls Samuel a "boy," the previous chapter suggests he was old enough that Hannah, his mother, had five more children. So, he may have been an older boy or a young man.

<sup>5</sup> See 1 Samuel 2:27-36.

<sup>6</sup> Blain, Susan A., Gouwens, Sharon I., O'Callaghan, Catherine, and Spradling, Grant, editors. 1996. Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource. Vol. 3. Cleveland: United Church Press., 121.

<sup>7</sup> Blain, et. al., 122.