

OF ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

“... the lamp of God had not yet gone out.”

Our scripture this morning opens during dark times for God’s people. Their leaders are faltering. Those entrusted with the care and keeping of the house of the Lord, as well as mediating between God the God’s people, had not just fallen down on the job, they are abusing the status of their office. Into this mess, God begins to intervene, to “do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle” Our story this morning marks the beginning of the end for one family of leaders and a shift to different type of relationship between God and God’s people. It is a time of transition.

In invite you to take a moment this afternoon to read the first two chapters of 1 Samuel. It is a compelling and well told story of the birth of Samuel. The story opens with the struggles of Hannah, Samuel’s mother, who has yet to have any children with her husband. Presenting herself to God at the temple Hannah weeps and prays to God, offering that if God remembers her and she becomes pregnant she will offer a male child to God as a servant in the temple. Now, at this time, the temple was overseen by Eli and his sons and they were making a mess of things. Perhaps not so much Eli as his sons. The worst crime of Eli was that he did not control his sons, who were also his subordinate priests. These two men stole the best portions of sacrifices from God for themselves. And, if that was not enough, they also raped the women who were serving/guarding the entrance to the tent of meeting. Instead of controlling his sons and protecting the people of Israel from their abuse, Eli largely abdicates his responsibilities. His eyesight is growing dim and he’s just not paying attention. We are told that he even mistakes Hannah’s prayer for the mumblings of a drunk. Thankfully, Hannah sets him straight and he sends her off with a blessing. She becomes pregnant and bears a son, and after he is weaned she brings him to Eli as she had promised. She then prays, or rather sings:

‘My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God...
‘There is no Holy One like the Lord,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.
Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.

The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
 he brings low, he also exalts.
 He raises up the poor from the dust;
 he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
 to make them sit with princes
 and inherit a seat of honor.

Sound familiar? We heard Mary's echo of this song – the Magnificat – during Advent. As the story continues we come to our passage this morning. As we heard, in the story God calls out to Samuel multiple times, and Samuel initially mistakes God's voice for the voice of Eli. And here, I think we need mention a few kind words for Eli. Yes, he did not control his sons as they ran amok in the temple but he still knows the voice of God and mentors Samuel in how to respond to it. And, sensing that what God has said to Samuel may not be good news for Eli and his sons, Eli doesn't avoid it, but rather encourages Samuel to speak the truth. As chapter 3 concludes the era of Eli and his sons ends and a new era opens with Samuel.

This Wednesday we will mark the transition of one Presidency to another. Our country is living through some very dark times. The Coronavirus pandemic continues to rage and ravage our people, our economy is a mess of unemployment and income inequality, and, despite finally getting the press it deserves, racial injustice is still systemic. The known but too often ignored and hidden white power movement stormed the nation's Capital. Like the sons of Eli, fouling God's dwelling, we've seen self-proclaimed patriots desecrate the heart of our democracy. As Chuck Schumer declared, "this temple to democracy was defiled."

In this moment, it is critical, that we goad each other as Eli did to Samuel to tell the truth plain and straight. What happened at the Capitol was not a protest. It was not a spontaneous action. It was not a peaceful action that somehow got out of control. It was a planned and coordinated attack on our democracy by white supremacists and militants. In the face of such a violent action there is no place for false equivalencies such as comparing the marauding behavior of white men to those who daily face unjust persecution simply because of the color of their skin.

In the face of such violence, we dare not rush ahead to "unity and healing" without first passing through judgment and justice. Those who participated in the attack on our democracy must be held accountable and there can be no haven or exception simply because one sports a congressional lapel pin. Those who have initially sought to undermine a democratic process cannot continue to be intimately involved in the process going forward.

And let us not let ourselves off the hook too readily. We must acknowledge we have borne our part in ignoring or just not dealing with some of the factors that brought us to this moment. As a largely white congregation, we must recognize our privilege, the many and various ways that the color of our skin has opened doors, presented opportunities and provided for a life that people of color rarely get to experience. As my UCC colleague Rachel Hackenberg noted in a post on Twitter this week:

Let us spare God our prayers for peace when we really want the delusion of ease.
 Let us silence our fervent prayers for hope when we really want an easy solution.

Let us toss aside our prayers for justice when we really prefer a free pass on guilt

Over the weekend, UCC national leaders as well as leaders from other mainline Protestant denominations issued warnings to churches over possible threats. While these warnings certainly were concerned about pastors and congregations the threats are assumed to be largely aimed at buildings and properties. In speaking with an African-American colleague last night I learned that the black community is also issuing warnings but they are not about bricks and mortar but direct physical harm to people of color.

The challenge for us in this moment is to speak the truth openly, honestly, clearly, unequivocally. As Marilyn Pagán-Banks notes in her recent Stillspeaking devotional:

... in the wake of the violent takeover of the U.S. Capitol during which many marched under the banner of Christianity, I must say there is no time for word mincing. It is past time for church people to be willing to name a thing, a thing. If we are to truly bring about the kin-dom of God, we can't keep the evil ideologies we know to be causing harm and death all around us out of our conversations, our analyses, our strategies, or our rituals.

Playing nice does nothing to stop evil. Our silence (denial, avoidance) makes us complicit. Evil can only be eradicated when we—the church—are willing to face it head on.

And, at the same time, we must resist the temptation to become that which we abhor – violent ourselves. Justice and judgment are not the final word but rather the penultimate one, that leads to true freedom, peace, and love. And while we can lament what has brought us to this point, in the words of one biblical scholar:

let us not mourn so deeply what seems to be passing
that we miss the signs of what God is bringing to birth.

The story of Samuel reminds us that as one era comes to an end a new era begins – pregnant with possibility and challenges. Let us listen deeply to what God is saying to us, let us proclaim boldly and honestly the good news of God's realm, let us join with others in faithfully living into whatever tomorrow brings.

AMEN.