

Spiritual Sages

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Texts: Luke 2:41-52, 1 Samuel 3:1-20

Eli was in his mid-80s when Hannah dropped her toddler off at the temple in Shiloh. This child was the answer to her fervent prayers and she loved him. But she had made a promise to God and intended to keep it, so here she was, two years after she'd knelt in this same doorway, so distraught in her prayers that Eli supposed she was drunk. Now she is here to hand the two-year-old over to him so he could be of service to God his entire life.

Now Eli had already raised his children. His boys are fully grown adults at this point. And suddenly he's raising another child. I imagine there are days when he looked at this situation and shook his head. Why? Why give me this task when I am already so old? But it seems God delights in this mixing of the generations. Remember Sarah when she was told she would have a baby at ninety...she laughed at the ridiculousness of the whole thing.

But Eli doesn't.

Eli just sets about his task. Not only is Samuel kept safe, but he is also trained in faith. The text says that he wears a linen ephod, a traditional garment of priests. And he ministers to the Lord under Eli, even though a ten-year-old ministering here would be odd indeed. Especially a child that is not in the priestly line. But Eli takes this child into his family, as one of his own, not by birth and blood, but through God.

And even though Samuel doesn't know God yet - Samuel hasn't graduated from Sabbath school, professed his faith, or any of the other markers of spiritual maturity - Eli trusts him enough to let him be right beside the ark of God - the holiest of holy things. And Eli puts him right there.

Perhaps he just figured it was his duty, a job to be done. Or perhaps he recognized that his years were valuable, the wisdom he'd gained through a lifetime of trial and error was a gift to be shared with this child. Or perhaps he realized he needed Samuel as much as Samuel needed him.

The wisdom of age and the energy of youth is a powerful combination.

Now Eli is in his mid-90s and Samuel is in his tweens. And Eli is sound asleep, in the wee hours of the morning, when Samuel comes running to see what Eli wants. All Eli wanted was to sleep. He hadn't called the boy, so he sent him back to bed.

Samuel comes back again and perhaps Eli is annoyed. "Quit playing around. Wake up when the sun is up," he tells Samuel.

But then a third time, Samuel comes to find him. He insists that he heard Eli calling him. Now it's been a long time since God has spoken, so let's have a little grace for Eli. It's not that he's

blind or foolish, but caught by his own complacency. There was an earnestness in Samuel's voice. And Eli is, unfortunately, wide awake now. Eli realizes what's going on.

Now, if anybody should be getting a direct message from God, it seems like it should be Eli. I mean, he's the high priest. And he's been doing this a long time. It would only be fair for it to be Eli. Not this young one who doesn't even know about God yet. But if Eli was jealous or fearful that the job was too big for Samuel, he didn't show it. Because what Eli did do was to give all the tools that Samuel needed and then trust this child to do what he was created to do.

I honestly wonder if God speaks more than we think and we just don't have our Eli to guide us.

It turns out that God has a message about Eli, a message destined to make the ears of all who hear it tingle. A message about justice not being done and faithfulness gone awry. And God needs Samuel to tell them.

But Samuel doesn't want to. Eli is not a cruel man. If anything, judging by the fact that he's struggling to keep his adult sons in line, he's too gentle. And Samuel isn't afraid of Eli.

Perhaps it's dread, a fear *of what he has to say*, that Samuel is feeling that morning. So often the Lord calls us to say the very things that we dread to say because the world will not like it. And it's even harder when the person you are having to call out is someone you love and who has loved you.

But Eli's response is full of grace. If what the Lord had to say was good, which, to be honest, is not the way it tends to work for those tasked with prophetic messages, Samuel would have been bursting with excitement. But he's silent as he joins Eli for breakfast. Seeing this, Eli coaxes and guides Samuel. Even though he must have anticipated what was coming, Eli encourages him to say what has to be shared.

I honestly wonder if God speaks more than we think and we just don't empower our Samuel to tell us.

Then receiving the news, Eli answers with a wisdom that comes from a long, faithful relationship with God. "I'm turning this over to God. His will be done."

And then he stays. Eli doesn't leave Samuel to carry on in this prophetic work by himself. Samuel grew up, it says. And Eli is at his side. Samuel continues to hear God and grow in favor at Shiloh. And Eli stays to guide him even as everything changes.

The wisdom of youth and steadiness of age is powerful.

It's so easy for us to look at this story and discount Eli. He's old, he's blind, he's yesterday's news. It's all about Samuel, the rising star, the child prophet. But I don't think it's that simple.

Because God is all about relationships and this story holds a tale of a relationship between generations. A relationship that comes into being, not just through birth and blood, but through God. If it wasn't for the wisdom of Eli, Samuel wouldn't have recognized God's voice. If Samuel had never heard, the whole story of the people of God would have unfolded in a very different way. But it worked because of a relationship across generations.

The Bible is full of stories about intergenerational relationships...Naomi and Ruth, Simeon and Mary, Anna and baby Jesus, Job and Elihu, Mary and Elizabeth, the child Jesus and the temple elders, Moses and Joshua, Lois and Timothy, to name a few. But so often, we make the story about one, discount the other, and diminish the work of relationships. But maybe this is just the point.

What would the church be like if we remembered this?

The church is at its best when our young people are encouraged to point to the world with imaginative wonder and challenge us to see this world as it changes...

like how virtual spaces CAN be home to very real communities even when we wouldn't feel as comfortable there or how to honor the belovedness of LGBTQ friends and neighbors even when we don't fully understand what it means...

and also when adults remind us of the traditions that have guided the church this far and remind us of the places where we veered off the path lest we forget whose we always are...

like how the church has always been a beacon of generosity and compassion, helping as a safety net to neighbors in need and the ways the church has spoken with firm and faithful grace against injustices everywhere, both in society and within the church.

The light of the kingdom shines through when they come together, the whole church, every generation with equal voices and shared respect. To share stories and lived experiences. To play and work together. To seek the places where justice is not being done and our hands and hearts are needed in a changing world.

Because the wisdom of age and the energy of youth is a powerful combination.
And the wisdom of youth and steadiness of age is just as powerful.

Sometimes God speaks through fire and earthquake. And sometimes God speaks in a whisper and a nudge. As much as this is a story about our faithful listening, it is also a story about the nudge, the relationships that teach us how to listen.

Look around. This is our family, not through birth or blood, but through God. In this place, we are called as partners in ministry. The challenge in this text might be to consider how we foster the Eli and Samuel relationships.

Not, to be clear, by dropping off all the kids with John and I, as tempting as that might be with school out for the summer. But by finding places to join across the generations with intention.

As a Matthew 25 church, we are called to practices of congregational vitality, practices that include space for everyone, intentionally considering the gifts of every age and how they blend together to minister better together than we could ever do alone. It means encouraging every person to value the wisdom they bring to the table and to listen to how God calls them to speak in their time and from their experience even when it challenges us. We must learn to hear the wisdom of youth and of tradition, blending them so we can hear the living Word of God among us.

Maybe it's hanging out with the kids in Sunday school once a month. Maybe it's inviting an adult to play with us at TOW. Maybe it's sharing stories, a human library of faith. It's in those intergenerational relationships that we learn how to listen for God's speaking to us *and* to listen to each other when God's word challenges us to grow and change. God is calling! Are we listening?

Amen.