

January 17, 2021. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

We find ourselves in a time of transition. Not just one, but many. So many, that it sometimes feels impossible to name them all.

We are in the midst of a presidential transition: one that has been unprecedentedly difficult and strange. We find ourselves in fearful anticipation of the inauguration that is to happen on Wednesday: fearful that this event could all too easily turn violent.

With the covid vaccine now a reality, we are in the midst (hopefully!) of a long transition to a life post covid. As more and more people get vaccinated, we are hopeful that the covid case numbers and deaths will begin to decrease and allow our country: our businesses, to open up again.

We are even in the midst of many transitions within our own congregation.

I am still getting to know you all, you are still getting to know me. We are still relatively fresh from transitioning to this service format and are now looking ahead at the safest way to transition to in-person services when that time comes.

Transitions can be difficult. They inevitably bring about change. Change is needed to adapt and survive, but often change sparks fear.

Our scripture is rooted in a time of change, of transition. See, at this time in the history of Israel - It's the 11th century, BCE, and up until this point, charismatic leaders, known as judges, had led the loosely organized tribes. They were not yet united as one nation. Israel is transitioning to a monarchy – the people want a king to rule them, they are begging God to give them a King like the other nations of their time, and they are about to get one. God is going to give them what they want, for better or worse. First Saul, and then David, who will unite the tribes into one Nation.

But Samuel is the transition. And just like the times we find ourselves in right now: Samuel's story is rooted in many transitions – both small and big. Not only are they transitioning from judges to kings, but also the way in which the people communicated with God is transitioning.

Gone are the days of miracles: when God appeared as a burning bush or a pillar of cloud and smoke and would part the mighty waters. We know this is true from the first verse of our scripture: “The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” It was harder to hear God, to

know God, when the ways history told you of communicating with God were no longer to be found.

Samuel and Eli themselves are in the midst of a transition.

The verses leading up to our scripture today detail the fall of Eli, the priest, and his priestly line. His sons, priests as well, disparage his name and the priestly tradition: they steal sacrificial meat, they sexually abuse women, and Eli did nothing to stop them.

Eli is falling and Samuel is rising: Samuel, the son of Hannah – who was barren and had no children. So she prayed to God and vowed to give up her child to God if she were only to have one. Samuel is to take Eli's place and usher the people to a new era.

And amidst all this transition and change and fear: a new call is born. The role of the trustworthy prophet.

Verse 20: And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD. This role ushers in the importance of words. It echoes back to Genesis 1 when God creates through words, through speaking, and it points ahead to the coming of Christ – in the beginning was the word.

Samuel, the trustworthy prophet, is to be the intermediary between God and the people and he is to pick their king: The King they so longed for.

And from the story of Samuel's call, we learn this universal truth: that community, discipleship, is crucial to hearing and listening for God's call. Whether it be God's call on our own life, or another. Samuel is just a boy when God calls him, and he misses it completely. He's spent his life training for a life of service to God and he misses when God is actually calling him. Sometimes all the religious and spiritual training in the world can never really prepare you for when God speaks.

And here is where the original Hebrew of this scripture shows the humor of it all. Lawrence Woods, in his commentary on this text writes, "Characteristically, Scripture leavens this sorry situation with plenty of Jewish comedy. The Lord calls 'Sam-u-el' meaning, 'God has heard.' The boy says 'Hear I am!' and runs to the priest Eli (significantly named 'my God'), who has not called for him. 'God has heard calls again, and again, the boy goes to Eli, my god, rather than his true God.'"

But the third time, Eli, the blind priest: whose failing eye sight represents both his physical failings and his spiritual failings, Eli is the one who recognizes this is God calling.

As Richard Boyce writes, “though Eli’s eyes may be failing him, his knowledge of the Lord, and his experience of the revelation of God’s word, are not. It takes both the attentiveness of the young Samuel’s ears and the wisdom of the old priest’s heart and mind to birth this new office in the service of the Lord.” It takes both the old and the young, those failing and those rising, to hear God’s call. It takes a community to discern and listen for God’s voice amongst our own human voices.

We still hold this universal truth close in our understanding of God’s call today.

An early part of the ordination process, in many denominations, is the affirmation of the two-fold nature of a call to ordained ministry: both internal and the external.

The internal – you feel the call yourself, forming inside you, pulling you towards pursuing seminary and the ordination process.

And the external: someone you know, or you don’t, telling you something like: hey, I think you would be a good pastor, have you ever thought about that before? For some, one speaks stronger than the other, but for all: both are important.

In this time of transition, of 24-hour news cycle, social media- where we are in some ways more connected than we have ever been, but also further apart and divided – we cannot underestimate the importance of community in hearing God’s call.

We all bring unique gifts and wisdom to the table. We need each other to discern God’s words from all the words that flood our lives. Don’t be afraid to lean into that – to ask your community, to help you listen for God.

When all we hear are the words of human beings, Samuel’s call teaches us that even here, the Lord is at work.

We can learn a lot from Eli in the story too.

Samuel’s call ultimately cements Eli’s downfall, and Eli knows this. Yet he remains faithful. He uses his wisdom to guide Samuel to hear God and when Samuel relays what God has spoken; he accepts it graciously.

Even when we are scared of change, even when the transition hurts us, even when we fall, we still play a key role in hearing and listening for God's call. The call and life of Samuel, the trustworthy prophet, tells us that in the midst of transition, when God's word seems rare: God never abandons us.

The lamp of God never runs out – God is always birthing new calls. It just takes community, discipleship, to listen and then hear God speak.

Thanks be to God. Amen.