

**“You Will See Greater Things than These”  
I Samuel 3:1-20; John 1:43-50**

**John 1:43-50**

<sup>43</sup>The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.”

<sup>44</sup>Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup> Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” <sup>46</sup>Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

<sup>47</sup>When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

<sup>48</sup>Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

<sup>49</sup>Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

<sup>50</sup>Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.”

Introduction to I Samuel 3

Back in the days of the Exodus, God gave Moses commandments for setting up the Tabernacle—a “mobile dwelling place for [God] in the midst of the Israelite camp”<sup>i</sup> where they kept the Ark of the Covenant. Easily overlooked, in the midst of chapter after chapter of detailed instructions, was this commandment for the part of the Tabernacle just outside the interior place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept:

God told Moses, “You shall...command the Israelites to bring you pure oil of beaten olives for the light, so that a lamp may be set up to burn

regularly. In the tent of meeting (the Tabernacle), outside the curtain that is before the covenant, Aaron and his sons shall tend the lamp, from evening to morning, before the LORD. It shall be a perpetual ordinance to be observed throughout their generations by the Israelites” (Exodus 27:20-21).

Many years later, the people of Israel had settled in the Promised Land, and the Tabernacle was now permanently stationed at a place called Shiloh.

There was a woman named Hannah, who had no children, who would travel annually from the hill country to worship and give sacrifices at Shiloh with her husband and his other wife, who did have children and was unkind to Hannah.

One year when they were at Shiloh, after they had eaten and drunk, Hannah got up and went and presented herself before God. She went into the sanctuary, and she prayed, and she wept, and she made a vow: if God would give her a son, she would dedicate the boy to God.

The high priest who tended the sanctuary at Shiloh was a man named Eli. Eli had two adult sons, both of whom were corrupt. They did what God specifically condemns throughout the history of Israel: they took advantage of the people who came to make sacrifices, taking sacrificial food from them beyond what the people were expected to give. They stole from the people to build up their own surplus. There is no record of Eli ever addressing their cruelty to the people of God, even though he seems to have known about it.

On this day, while Hannah was praying silently, she was moving her lips, and for whatever reason, when Eli saw that, he assumed she was drunk. So he came over and reprimanded Hannah for being drunk.

And she said, “No! I’m deeply troubled; I haven’t been drinking. I’ve been pouring out my soul before God.

Don't regard your servant as a worthless woman: I've been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time."

And Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight" (I Samuel 1:1-18).

The text of First Samuel remembers that Hannah said, "Don't regard me as *bat beliya'al*, "a daughter of worthlessness" or a "worthless woman." In the next chapter, when it speaks of Eli's sons, it will use the exact same term to call them *beney beliya'al*: "worthless men."<sup>ii</sup>

After that day, Hannah did have a son, and she named him Samuel. And, as she had promised, she dedicated the boy Samuel to God as a *nazirite*, meaning he was "separated" or "consecrated" to God.<sup>iii</sup>

### **I Samuel 3:1-20**

<sup>1</sup>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.

<sup>2</sup>At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; <sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and the boy said, "Here I am!" <sup>5</sup>and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; lie down again."

So Samuel went and lay down.

<sup>6</sup>The LORD called again, “Samuel!”

Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.”

But Eli said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.”

<sup>7</sup>Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

<sup>8</sup>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.

<sup>9</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup>Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

<sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end.

<sup>13</sup>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.

<sup>14</sup>Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.”

<sup>15</sup>The boy 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. <sup>16</sup>But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” He said, “Here I am.”

<sup>17</sup>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.”

<sup>18</sup>So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him.

Then Eli said, “It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him.”

<sup>19</sup>As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. <sup>20</sup>And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God!**

### The Sermon

This month marks the fiftieth anniversary of the release of a landmark recording by Johnny Cash called *At Folsom Prison*. As a music journalist wrote this week, “Fifty years ago Johnny Cash strode into Folsom State Prison...and emerged with an eternal album. The union of Cash and his hungry, jailhouse audience communicated a startling authenticity, a singular moment... It was all at once an unflinching glimpse of prison life, a showcase for the country legend’s panther swagger, and a communion of the disenfranchised during a decade concerned with social justice. And it marked a renaissance in Cash’s life and career.”<sup>iv</sup>

Ten years ago, the same reporter conducted an interview with Johnny's daughter, a respected artist in her own right, Roseanne Cash.

She told him that her Dad “was so extraordinarily famous during those several years that his life was so hard because of it...He could not leave his house without being accosted. And,” she said, “I never saw him being anything less than polite and kind to people. *I couldn't have done it. I don't know anybody who could.*”

The interviewer responded—showing some chutzpah, in my opinion—“But I think for a while he courted that attention.”

And Roseanne Cash says, “See, this is what I resist. This is why I don't do this stuff and talk in interviews and participate in this kind of lionization and the myth-making about my dad because that very thing was so destructive to him. The projections just keep piling up. It's not just the prisoners. It's the downtrodden, wherever they live. And people who were seeming to turn it into a religion and making him less than human.”

She says to the reporter, “These people who come up to me all the time to tell me about my father, or to tell me that I'm not a good American and my father was a good American, or that I'm not this and my father was that. It's just bizarrely inhuman and unfair. He was a real man with grave faults and great genius and beauty in him.

“But he wasn't this guy who could save you or anyone else.”

And the interviewer kind of sheepishly says, “If we could get back for a moment to the album...”

And Roseanne says, “Good!”<sup>v</sup>

*He was a real man with grave faults and great genius and beauty in him. But he wasn't this guy who could save you or anyone else.*

Who was Eli to Samuel?

He looked after him as a boy.

He raised him in the sanctuary.

He taught him worship, and taught him faithfulness.

He helped him identify the voice of God, and taught Samuel his first response to God's call: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."

And he was a complicated, flawed person.

He failed to discipline his corrupt sons, when he should have felt responsibility to God and loyalty to the believing people who came to the sanctuary, trusting him not to defraud them.

He seems to have been suspicious of a woman praying in the Tabernacle. It reminds me of a typical story from South Africa during the days of Apartheid, when a black African woman was cleaning a church for white people, and went up to polish the railing where members of the congregation would come forward to receive communion.

A church member—a white person—happened to wander into the sanctuary from the back, saw the black person at the rail, and called out, "Hey, what do you think you're doing up there?"

When the cleaner rose from her work to look toward the back of the sanctuary, and her eyes met those of the white man who had come in, he relaxed and in a pleasant, even friendly chuckle, he said with relief and apology, "Oh, thank God. I was afraid you were praying."

Based on Eli's response to Hannah's fervent praying, wherever the assumption that she must have been drunk came from, it doesn't seem to have occurred to him that every human being is capable of and free to engage in bringing their deepest needs to God.

For that matter, even if it was only the idea that she was inebriated that made him pounce, was that really the best reaction?

So, who was Eli?

Whoever he was, can we allow Eli to be who he is? He is not a superhuman role model; *and*, he seems to be raising Samuel with deep faith and true tenderness.

And when Samuel overcomes his fear and tells Eli what God had told him the night before, that Eli's household was about to be punished and there was no religious ritual they could perform to get out of it, Eli demonstrates integrity in faithfulness:

"It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

Who is your Eli?

Who has played a significant role in your hearing God's particular call on your life?

Who has reoriented you when you were confused?

Who has treated your mistaking God's voice for someone else's with kindness?

Who taught you who God is, and how a good, kind, intelligent, faithful person can most faithfully respond to God?

Can you allow them to be complicated people, too, trusting that God will take care of the rest?

Samuel would follow God's call on his life by being the last of the Israelite judges before the introduction of kingship in Israel; the prophet who disciplined King Saul and who found the boy David, anointed him, and counseled him as he became the greatest king of Israel in Israel's golden age.

That was God's call on Samuel's life. How will you follow God's call on your life?

When Jesus went to Galilee and found Philip, and Philip found Nathanael and said, "We have found the One we've been waiting for, and it's Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth," Nathanael answered back, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

And Philip said to him, "Come and see."

And when Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

And Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" And Jesus said, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

And Jesus said to Nathanael, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these."

Friends, it is not just a new year that we are starting, but a new day. This one day we live today comes one time, and one time only. It is a unique gift from God.

And it is a gift presented to us as a church family, as one community, as one neighborhood of people who need each other and learn from and lean on each other,

who point each other in the right direction, and who pardon each other when we've overstepped our bounds. We can gently say "Ouch" when we get hurt, and "Oops" when we didn't mean to inflict pain.

We can let God be in charge of the judging, and we can be ready to help when help is needed, but to let each other be in charge of and responsible for our own selves.

We are all somebody's Eli. We are simultaneously good enough and not good enough. We are flawed, and we are beautiful. We are made by God, guided by the Spirit, redeemed and saved by Jesus, and we don't get it right every time. But we keep trying.

Who is your Eli? Can you give thanks for their guidance? Can you forgive him or her their weaknesses?

It may get a little easier once we learn to follow where God leads us.

And when we come and see what Jesus wants to do with us, we will see greater things than these.

It is a gift worth celebrating that we get to see them together.

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<sup>i</sup> HarperCollins Bible, n. Exod 25:1-31:18, 125.

<sup>ii</sup> See Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos's endlessly insightful Reading Samuel: A Literary and Theological Commentary (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2012), 37.

<sup>iii</sup> See Numbers 6:1-8.

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<sup>iv</sup> Michael Streissguth. “Johnny Cash’s ‘At Folsom Prison’: Rosanne Cash Recalls Iconic Live Album: In a never-before-published interview, the Man in Black’s daughter talks historic prison concert, which turns 50 this month” (January 12, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/country/features/johnny-cashs-at-folsom-prison-rosanne-cash-on-dads-album-w515393>).

<sup>v</sup> Streissguth. “Cash’s ‘At Folsom Prison’”