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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

1 Samuel 3

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Summer of Stories: Samuel

Opening Greeting and Prayer:

Please join me in prayer: Creator God, you know each of our names. May we hear you when you summon us to listen or to speak. Empower us with your Holy Spirit to discern how you are calling us and leading us today. In Jesus name. Amen.

Message:

Summer of stories 2022. We are exploring stories in the scriptures with children as central characters. We have looked at the stories of Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, and Moses and Miriam. Interesting thus far, we have studied pairs of siblings, some together and others in their individual stories. Each story has offered us opportunities for wonder, frustration, reflection, sadness, fear, loss, grief, and hope... almost like real life.

In today's story, we have moved far down the storyline of ancient Israel in the Hebrew scriptures or Old Testament. The wandering people that followed Moses and Miriam to the edge of the promised land are now settled into their particular tribal regions, but they are longing for a king like the nations around them. They are longing for central authority that will hopefully establish them among the other peoples in the land. The book of Joshua seems to paint a rosier picture of the conquest of the promised land than what appears in later books. The same people groups that they supposedly eradicate or defeat in Joshua come back again and again in the

story as threats to the ancient community, so the people begin asking God for a king who will fight the battles for them. This morning, we look at Samuel's childhood experience in being summoned by God to his true vocation as prophet alongside his training as priest.

In the first 3 verses of 1 Samuel 3, the author sets the stage. Samuel has been under Eli's direction since he was weaned from his mother and handed over to the priestly ministry at the tent of meeting in Shiloh. No temple has been built yet, nor has Jerusalem been conquered. Shiloh is where the ancient Israelites come to worship. Samuel is a miracle-child, the firstborn to a barren mother. She offers Samuel back to God in gratitude for God's provision, a terribly difficult decision for a mother who had begged each year for children when she came to worship. In this time in ancient Israel, people do not hear from God much. Eli has grown old and blind, incapable of doing all that is required, so the boy Samuel is doing so along with Eli's two sons. Samuel has only every known his life at Shiloh. Eli is his family.

When our story begins, the lamp of God is still lit, which means that it is dark, maybe not long before dawn when YHWH, the Lord, first visits Samuel. If Eli's eyesight is poor enough, Samuel had probably grown used to waking up at all hours of the day and night to serve his Eli's wishes. But this time is different. Samuel had been startled awake by the sound of his name, but when he goes to ask Eli what he needs, Eli denies calling his name, which is strange, so Samuel returns to his mat to sleep. He had almost fallen asleep again when he hears the call of his name again. He rushes to Eli, who is startled when Samuel touches him. Eli denies again that he has called him. Maybe Eli was finally losing touch with reality. His vision had been getting worse and worse. Maybe his mind was going along with it. How could he not hear this voice?

Samuel settled down again and got comfortable. He lay awake for a little while when he heard it again, this time so clearly and audibly that he thought Eli had wandered over to his part

of the tent. *Samuel!* But when he looked around, no one was there, so he got up again and went to Eli. Something had changed in Eli's posture when Samuel woke him up this time. Eli told him to speak back to the voice, to tell God that he was listening... but had he really heard God, the Lord, the one that Eli talked about every day as they went about performing the sacrifices. What did God want with Samuel? How would he know if God had responded? Was he in trouble?

Samuel slowly trudged back to his mat and lay down. Not much later, he felt the wind rustle the flaps of the tent as something or someone entered. They were standing there, only a few feet from Samuel and a few feet further from the ark of the covenant. Samuel froze and waited to see what the intruder might want. He thought quickly about where the ceremonial knife had last been laid when Eli had gone back to his sleeping area. Maybe he could get to it quick enough to ward off whoever this was. But then, his name: *Samuel, Samuel*. The same voice... the Lord. Samuel took a few breaths and responded, "Speak, for your servant is listening." When the person finished speaking, Samuel felt the wind again rustle through the tent, and the figure was gone. Samuel never even saw the face, but he couldn't believe the message that he was given. Why didn't God just visit Eli and tell Eli what God had told Samuel? What was he going to say to Eli? Eli had told him to respond to the Lord, but had Eli realized what God might say?

Samuel couldn't sleep the rest of the night. He couldn't stop playing the word of the Lord over and over in his head. When light broke through the tent, he quickly got up and began preparing everything for the day's visitors and sacrifices. He lost himself in his work until he heard his name again, this time fainter and weaker. He knew it was Eli. When he arrived at Eli's side, Eli asked him what the Lord had said to him, even threatening him with whatever God had said if he didn't tell the truth. Did Eli already know? Had he heard the Lord speak the message?

Eli's whole tone had changed, taking on notes of fury and anguish as the words floated away into the air. He couldn't see Samuel or anything well enough to make good on his threats, so why was he so agitated? After a few cold and painful moments, Samuel finally blurted out everything that the Lord had spoken, and by the end of it, Eli had become stone-cold. He finally responded, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him." And that's it. This specific moment between Samuel and Eli ends here. The author tells us that Samuel grows up to be a great prophet, respected and revered across the entire land of ancient Israel.

Interestingly enough, we hear little of why God called Samuel to be a prophet. Did Samuel have all of the right skills and personality for the job? How had God landed with him? We often look at gifting when we consider people for a particular position or role, but we do not always see that in the Hebrew scriptures. God's selection and summons seem to come whether or not all of the credentials have been fulfilled, which is challenging to the way that we often do things, trying to match people with jobs or vocations that offer fulfillment of the "gifts" that they possess. But is there a difference between this matching up of roles and gifting and God's call or summons on someone's life?

Maybe Samuel's true gift was his humble posture, that he was really listening, his ears and eyes were open and ready for the winds of God's presence. After hearing the Lord's message for Samuel, I think about when the right moments are to speak words of concern or correction to someone who has far more experience and wisdom than I do. Samuel was understandably afraid to tell someone that had shaped his life so profoundly that God had it out for him. Who else could he trust besides Eli? He only saw his biological parents once a year, and his mother always smothered him with new clothes for his work in the tent of meeting. How did Eli and Samuel's

relationship change after this moment? How long was Eli around before Samuel was on his own tending to the sacrifices and offerings at Shiloh?

On top of all of this, how was Samuel supposed to make sense of the Lord's steadfast love for Israel and God's terribly harsh words toward Eli and his family? Eli's family's wickedness will not be expiated forever? Was this God's way of reminding Samuel of the power and responsibility that he would possess as prophet and priest? Finally, I wonder if this story is one of the first that Samuel told to the people who visited Shiloh after he realized that his service to YHWH, the covenant-God of Israel, was going to look far different than what Eli or his sons had ever taught him.

Closing Prayer:

Let's pray: God of steadfast love and hope-filled presence, thank you for the ways that you challenge us to think about our lives and our faith in you through the stories of those who have gone before us. Open our eyes and ears that we may see and hear your guidance, your summons, your call on our lives even to those things that seem beyond us like you did with Samuel. In Jesus' name. Amen.