

## The Call of Samuel — The Story

Samuel's call comes from the Old Testament, from 1 Kings 3, 1-18. Leading into it is the figure of his mother Hannah. Elkanah, Samuel's father. Was accustomed to taking his family to the Temple at Shiloh every year. His wife Hannah was unable to conceive. At this visit, she vowed to dedicate to the Temple a son if God granted her one. Samuel was born. Good to her word, she literally carries out the command of Exodus that every first-born son belongs to God. A requirement Levites took upon themselves as representatives. Samuel, now no longer a baby, began to serve in the Temple. The story quickly moves to how badly things had gone in the Temple. The sons of Eli the priest had brought corruption to their own priesthood as well as the Temple by the selfishness of their service.

One way in which the Bible establishes a point is by contrast. We see here the righteousness of Samuel highlighted against the wickedness of the sons of Eli. Possibly because of their behavior, we are told how rare it was for God to speak in those days. The atmosphere suggests the absence of God because of violations done by those serving at this holy place. One night, while the boy Samuel was sleeping near the sanctuary, something extraordinary occurred. Probability he slept there to keep the sanctuary lamp burning. Temple regulations decreed the lamp should burn until the dawn. Samuel was there to attend the lamp. Before dawn he heard someone calling him. And the voice called him by name. He suspected what he heard came from Eli. And so he arose and ran to him, asking why he called.

This part of the story is charming. An innocent child introduced to a mystical experience. The voice comes to him as a feeling of otherness. Otherness for most people but especially children implies something external. Therefore it must be Eli calling. Folk Tales and Fairy Tales indicate three times leading to a resolution. The boy assures Eli he had called him, something Eli denies twice. But the boy's certainty grows with the second calling. He feels certain he is being called. It must have come from Eli because no one else was nearby.

So much of a child's life takes place outside. Eli is pictured as someone slow to discern spiritual experience. He does not pick up immediately what is happening. Earlier, when Samuel's mother was at the Temple praying for a child, Eli thought her drunk because her lips moved while she prayed. His mistake brings to mind the Pentecostal event when people in the street thought the inspired Apostles drunk. It took three visits for Eli to suspect something unusual had happened. We the readers have been previously informed how rare God's revelation had become during those dark times. Eli was not ready to recognize what was occurring. Upon the last visit, Eli finally guides the boy on how to respond. He offers a formula, "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening."

Mystical experiences vary. This experience came with a message. Here the picture darkens. After inviting the voice to speak, the boy is instructed to deliver to Eli a message of doom. God will carry out against the family of Eli all that has been

threatened. Samuel does not tell Eli until morning. He may have realized it was bad news. He speaks only after Eli demands he reveal what he has been told. After this oracle of doom is spoken, Eli responds, "He is the Lord. He will do what he judges best." This response by Eli may bring him to his finest hour. He accepts all God will send his way.

The message does not come as a complete shock. Earlier warnings had been given. An initial threat had been leveled. Someone described only as a man of God delivered to the priest a similar message. Pointed out specifically were the abuses taking place in the Temple. A sentence was announced. It included the death of Eli's sons and the eventual elimination of his whole family as priests of the Temple. With this condemnation of sins came a promise of a new priesthood. Therefore, Samuel's message was not the first time Eli heard it. Which may have further convinced him the revelation was authentic.

Samuel revelation does not therefore come without preparation. This unnamed John the Baptist figure prepares the way for this new prophet and priest. The Gospel of Luke speaks of Jesus growing up in wisdom. So of Samuel who also grows up and the Lord is with him. He grows to such an extent that all Israel accepts him as a prophet. He keeps the tradition of Shiloh alive for a while, although without the Ark of the Covenant. But the presence of God now shows itself in the words of the prophet. As would happen during times of exile, when no Temple was there to inspire and guide, the prophetic Word of God took on greater importance.

The Ark of the Covenant eventually returned to Israel. The Philistines, who had captured it in battle, suffered a series of tragedies. They blamed their misfortunes on the presence of the Ark. No matter where they moved it, people kept suffering setbacks. Eventually, they loaded the Ark in a cart and dropped it at an Israeli village. The people rejoiced at the Divine Presence once more in their midst..

Samuel has significance for our series. He remained a priest while functioning as a prophet. After Shiloh, he continued to offer sacrifices for the people. When the Israelites gathered at Mizpah, Samuel offered a lamb as a holocaust to the Lord. This was a priestly act (1 Samuel 7, 9-10).

Our Liturgical celebrations call for activities that are both prophetic (Lectors) and priestly (Eucharistic Ministers). Samuel joins together prophet and priest. Catholic Liturgy joins pulpit and altar. Lay ministers assist in the Liturgy of the Word with its prophetic overtones and the Liturgy of the Eucharist with its priestly overtones.

The personal story of Samuel also claims dark moments. We know little of his married life. But as he grew older, he appointed sons to positions of judges throughout the land. People could come to them with issues that needed resolution. The sons would comprise lower courts while the father would only need to deal with what they could not resolve. Here we come upon what Scripture scholars refer to as a literary sandwich. Samuel in the middle and the corrupt sons of Eli on one side and his own corrupt sons

on the other. Sadly, Samuel's family could not exercise their positions any better than Eli's family. Which led to the people crying out for a king. They had enough of judges. They wanted something new. Other nations were ruled by kings and so should they. Samuel once more is called but this time to choose a king for the nation. At God's direction, he chooses and anoints Saul and later David. It is David who brings the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and his son Solomon who builds the great Temple to house the Divine Presence.

Leadership in Israel now resided in three offices: the prophet, the priest and the king. These same three roles are seen later as ministries of Jesus. They also represent three areas of Liturgical ministries: the prophet as Lector, the priest as Eucharistic minister, and the king as Liturgical administrator. Those three roles stand as the future direction toward which our series is moving.

But first, we need to create a Biblical contrast. To grasp the various ways by which God may call, we need to look at another model. The conversion of St. Paul will supply that contrast. The prophet Samuel and Paul were both called but in different ways. Seeing those differences but also similarities may help us get to know both men a bit better.

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