

Second Sunday After the Epiphany (B/RCL)  
January 15, 2006  
1 Samuel 3.1-20  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Babies everywhere! The Samuel we hear about in today's first lesson from First Samuel (named for him!) is another child of promise, another answer to prayer, like John the Baptist. Like John's mother (Elizabeth), Samuel's mother (Hannah), was unable to have children and was scorned because of it. However, **unlike** John's father (Zechariah), Samuel's father (Elkanah), had **two** wives. (Hannah and Elkanah lived about a thousand years earlier than Elizabeth and Zechariah, in a time when polygamy, having more than one wife, was okay. It lends new meaning to *The Wives' Club*.)

The person who made the most fun of Hannah for not having any children was Elkanah's **other** wife, Peninnah. Apparently she was jealous that Elkanah tenderly loved Hannah despite her inability to give him sons or daughters, and he tried to lift her spirits and make her feel special by giving her presents he **didn't** give Peninnah. The fertile wife felt slighted and often mocked Hannah until she dissolved into tears.

One year the whole family made its annual pilgrimage to Shiloh to sacrifice to the LORD, and Hannah sat in that holy space and brought all her sorrow, all her longing before the LORD. She was so intent in prayer she was moving her lips and silently pronouncing the words that tumbled out of her heart to the LORD. The old priest Eli saw this, assumed Hannah was drunk and told her to leave and sober up. She stuck up for herself, told him, "I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD" (1 Sam.1.15), and he humbly blessed her with these words:

"Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him."  
(1 Sam. 1.17)

The prayer was answered and a child was born to Hannah and Elkanah, a son, Samuel, the Samuel we meet in today's reading. Before he was even conceived, Hannah had promised God that if God gave her a son, in gratitude she would give that boy back to the LORD to serve Him. She did. For me, a heart-wrenching scene in Scripture is the description of how Hannah weaned her little boy, made a tiny ephod (or priestly apron) for him, and dropped him off in Shiloh, no more than a preschooler, to live out his life in God's service, under the care of the priest Eli who had once accused her of being drunk.

Hannah was a woman of her word, whom God later blessed with another five children, but I can't imagine any of them took away the sting of her separation from Samuel. Each year she went on pilgrimage to Shiloh with another homemade ephod for her child to wear, a size or two larger than the last year's. I suppose the knowledge that she had kept her vow and that her son was consecrated to God strengthened her, but from a mother's point of view, my heart has always ached for both of them.

When we pick up the story today, Samuel is still a child but old enough to sleep alone in the tent that held the ark of the covenant, and responsible enough to tend the oil lamps that lit the sanctuary. He hears his name called in the near darkness, and assumes Eli wants or needs him. (Eli was nearly blind, so calls for help from his helper probably weren't unusual.) "Here I am!" Samuel responds, and **runs** to Eli, breathlessly announcing, "Here I am, for you called me" (1 Sam.3.5). The **third** time that scene is played out, Eli finally realizes that **God** is calling the boy, and shares his spiritual insight.

"Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" (1 Sam. 3.9)

When **we** hear a voice calling us, **we** don't immediately assume it's God either, **do** we? We expect our communication with God to be one way, from earth to heaven,

from us to God. We assume we'll be doing all the talking. We forget, though, that nobody ever learned anything by talking. We learn what we don't already know by **listening**.

There's a lot of **meat**, hearty spiritual nourishment in this story about God calling out to Samuel in the night. This chapter of Scripture is a hinge on which hangs the transition of power from priests to prophets in ancient Israel. But in order for this sermon to fill our hearts, and not just our heads, let's pause and treasure the possibility, the **probability**, that God wants to talk to **us**, too. God spoke to Eli through Hannah, who wasn't drunk with wine but with pain and hope. In turn, God spoke to Hannah through Eli, when he said, "Go in peace...." God spoke to Samuel through Eli, when Eli directed him to wait on the LORD. And God spoke to Eli through Samuel, with a terrible word of judgment on Eli and his sons (a reminder that God's word to us is not always sweet or comforting).

**Usually** God speaks to us through other human beings. Listen to this brief daily devotion called "Listen!" written in a booklet called *Living Faith* by a man named Kevin Perrotta:

When the child Samuel heard a voice in the night, he thought it was his guardian, the old priest Eli, calling him. But he was mistaken. The voice seemed to be Eli's, but it was God who was speaking to Samuel.

I too have heard a voice. At the time, I thought it was the voice of the woman in the office next to mine... the voice of a guy I played basketball with... the voice of my wife... the voice of my pastor... the voice of my daughter... the voice of a man at the grocery store. But when I paid attention, I realized a different voice was speaking to me through their words. The words were theirs; but the encouragement, the friendship, the affection, the warning, the wisdom came to me from a deeper source.

If only at the office, on the basketball court, in the  
bedroom, at the grocery store, everywhere, I could say what  
Samuel said: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."  
(Jan.-March 2006, January 11<sup>th</sup> devotion)

Through whom is God speaking to you?? Listen – closely -- to find out. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson