

**WESTMINSTER**  
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SERMON

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# Worthy of Trust

Laura Bentley



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### Introduction

The word of the Lord was rare. Visions were not widespread. These words will begin our reading today.

The narrative lectionary drops us into Israel's story long after the wilderness years.

In the wilderness, the word of the Lord was constant — a pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night. God's presence was visible, central to the Hebrew people's life together.

But once they settled in the promised land, life became stable. The tabernacle was placed in Shiloh, a permanent structure built around it. God remained amid the people, but for most, out of sight became out of mind.

The Book of Judges ends with the words, "Everyone did what was right in their own sight." This was not harmonious freedom; it was chaos. Corruption ran rampant. Distrust permeated the social fabric. Even in Shiloh, among the priests, the word of God was rarely heard.

Eli, the high priest and judge in Shiloh, heard a woman pouring her heart out to God in prayer. And he assumed she was drunk. It took him time to recognize a desperate woman, coming to God earnestly in prayer.

That woman, Hannah, became the mother of Samuel. Sameul was dedicated to the Lord, and he grew up in the temple, learning from Eli.

But even Eli's household was not immune from corruption. His sons used their power for greed and exploitation. Eli knew this, even tried to stop them once, but then looked away. He

was good-hearted but ineffectual — well-meaning but unwilling to risk his comfort for the truth.

Perhaps the word of the Lord was not so rare.

Perhaps visions had not faded.

The people—and their leaders—were just not listening or looking.

Then one night, a young boy named Samuel was startled awake by a voice... and the rest of ancient Israel with him.

God is still speaking. Will we listen?

Please join me in prayer.

### **Prayer for Illumination**

Holy God,

In a world where so many voices compete for our attention, we pause now to listen for yours—  
the voice that calls us by name,  
the word that brings truth to light,  
the Spirit that makes us worthy of trust.

Open our hearts,  
that your word might take root in us and bear fruit in our lives.  
Through Jesus Christ, the Living Word, we pray.  
Amen.

### **Scripture**

*1 Samuel 3:1-21*

3 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 he said, "Here I am!" <sup>5</sup> and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he 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 he 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> 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 he 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. <sup>21</sup> The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

### **“Here I Am”**

Samuel was a boy, maybe around 11. He grew up in the temple. Like many of the kids you see in the halls of Westminster on a Wednesday night, Samuel was comfortable in this sacred space. So comfortable that he slept next to the Ark of the Covenant—the very dwelling place of God’s presence.

According to Leviticus, only the high priest was supposed to enter that space once a year, after purification, on the Day of Atonement.

Yet, there Samuel lay peacefully asleep.

The word of the Lord was rare; visions were unheard of.

Samuel did not yet know a God of power, but he seemed to know a God of peace.

In the stillness of the night, a voice called his name: “Samuel!” “Here I am,” he said, assuming it was Eli.

Three times he went to his mentor until Eli realized it was God calling the boy. He told Samuel, “Go and lie down. If you hear the voice again, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

God is still speaking. Will we listen?

About ten years ago a NFL press conference went viral. Marshawn Lynch sat at the table, surrounded by cameras, mics, and reporters. And for every question that was asked, he gave the same response, “I am here so I don’t get fined.”

I am here so I don’t get fined.

There is a difference between passive presence and active participation.

God’s call demands an active response. “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

The temple was there...but what difference did it make in the chaos and corruption around it?

The priests were there...but they colluded with abuse or were quietly resigned.

God’s word was calling out...but until someone would listen earnestly, it fell to the ground.

The young Samuel woke up and listened.

## **What God Actually Says**

This is often where the story ends.

Before this week, I could have told you exactly what Samuel said to God...but not what God said to him.

What God says is not comforting. It was a message of accountability for Eli. God revealed that Eli's sons had abused their sacred trust, and that Eli had failed to stop them.

It does not matter that this behavior was the norm. God does not turn a blind eye. God is persistent in the call that God's people use their power and position to serve, not to swindle; to benefit of the least, not to fill their own bellies and bank accounts.

Eli's family lineage as priests would end.

God would raise new leadership, a pure heart from outside the old system.

Samuel lay awake with this truth until morning.

Have you ever felt that heartbreak — when someone you respected, even loved, fell from the pedestal you'd placed them on?

God awakened Samuel to the depth of injustice around him, closer to him than he imagined. Injustice often doesn't look like active harm — it looks like passive silence. Eli wasn't cruel; he was complacent. And in the quiet, harm flourished.

Yet Eli, in the end, lends Samuel courage: “Do not hide the word from me.” He teaches the boy what he himself could not live out— to be trustworthy, to tell the truth even when it’s hard.

God is still speaking. Will we listen?

### **When It Seems Good to the Spirit...and to Us**

Several years ago, I served a church with an incredible group of middle school and high school students. They were courageous and compassionate and led us adults by the ways they served others.

These students had built credibility with the congregation by sharing their experiences of God and their hearts for outreach.

In 2018, after the Parkland school shooting, students across the country organized the March for Our Lives. All of our youth wanted to go, and they wanted the church’s blessing. They weren’t pushing a political platform; they were pleading for adults to protect them.

They spoke the truth that this violence, the fear they had going to school, the lack of control they had as teenagers to not even able to vote, while lawmakers did little to nothing, was wrong. Not everyone in our congregation agreed with the demands of the March organizers, but a majority did agree that we trusted the hearts, the words, the actions of these students and their leaders.

So, with some discomfort, the church’s leadership said, OK. We will not support a particular candidate or party, but we do believe in God’s call to protect the vulnerable, to stand

alongside the brokenhearted, to listen to voices that are not often centered.

As the Jerusalem council declared in Acts, “It seemed right to the Holy Spirit and to us.”

The courage to listen to hard truth, to act even when it unsettles us — that’s what makes a community worthy of trust.

The community of Westminster has lived into this calling.

We have left the comfort of the status quo to speak truth that seemed right to the Holy Spirit and to us: Blessing Rev. Dr. Galbreath, as he went to Selma during the Civil Rights Movement; including women in all levels of leadership; officiating the weddings of same sex couples; to recognizing and affirming the calling of LGBTQ elders and deacons; worshiping with guitars and drums; speaking clearly against violence no matter who perpetuates it or whom it is against. We have waited, listening for God’s Spirit, and then acted, respecting dissent but moving forward in faith.

God is still speaking. We, God’s servants, are listening.

It is when we step out in faith, in courage, in boldness to proclaim the truth that we have heard that we become worthy of trust.

## **Worthy of Trust**

Public trust in institutions is near historic lows. Gallup reports only 36% trust the church or organized religion — more than Congress or the courts, but still low. People assume

corruption and self-preservation as the norm for most institutions.

The Church—like the temple in Samuel’s time—has not been immune.

But God is not silent. God still calls people like Samuel — and us — to earnestly seek and speak God’s vision for the world.

What we do here is not about passive presence.

It’s about being people who listen...and act.

After the resurrection, in John’s Gospel account, Jesus came to his disciples, met them with peace, and breathed the Holy Spirit into them.

That same Spirit that spoke to Samuel in the tabernacle dwells in us.

That same Spirit speaks to and through Christ’s church.

That same breath of God that called a child to speak truth to power still calls us to be worthy of trust.

So, people of God, what will we say...

About the political violence that is becoming commonplace?

About the harassment and abuse of our immigrant neighbors?

About dehumanizing rhetoric against our trans siblings?

About greed and corruption?

About the daunting challenges we are handing to the next generation?

What will say about the fears we hold of the “other,” the anger we have toward those who do not think or act like us, the ways we have chosen comfort over God’s calling?

The world does not need a silent church. It needs a trustworthy one.

A church that knows both the peace and the power of God’s word.

A church willing to step out in faith, even when it is risky, even when we don’t all agree, because we believe that God’s Spirit really does dwell among us.

God is still speaking.

Will we?

Amen.





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