

“A True Prophet of God”

1 Samuel 3: 1-10

I have to tell you before we get started that this is one of my favorite Bible stories. I love the fact the story starts in darkness and then a voice is heard. I love how the main character is a young person. I love the empowering message of call that is behind this text, the message of how God calls an unlikely person to be a prophet. I love Bible stories like this one. They seem to constantly remind me that through God and with God nothing is impossible.

But I wonder if there is not something else going on in this text, something beyond just a great story of how a young boy is called to be a prophet, something that calls us to look beyond the cuteness factor of this story and see the real power of God at work here.

I can still remember the first time I preached on this text. I had been asked to come and preach at my home church in North Carolina, sort of like a homecoming celebration for the church. I gave what I felt was a glorious sermon. I lifted up the call of the wider church to bring forth more servant leadership. I shared some statistics about how there weren't enough ministers to serve all the churches around. I gave an impassioned plea, well, that's probably not right. Looking back, I

think it is safe to say that I was an arrogant last year seminarian who thought I knew it all. Let's just say, instead of a sermon that day, I gave a lecture to a group of people who had nurtured my faith, who had supported my journey to ministry, a lecture to a group of people who encouraged me to follow my call into ministry.

As I said, looking back, I'll admit, it probably was not my greatest sermon and yes I fully admit I probably said some harsh things that I had no right or authority to say.

But what stands out to me about that day is not that. What stands out to me about that day is the disconnect that seemed to happen after the service. The disconnected surfaced while I was standing in line to greet people as they were going out the door. Most people were politely telling me how much they appreciated me being there, or how proud they were of me. With all their nice comments, I began to wonder if any ever listened to the sermon that day, well, that is until this one woman came through the line. This woman as she approached me was clearly agitated. Finally, when she got up to me in line, she said, "How dare you? After all that we have done for you, how dare you say such things to us? We have always lifted up young people to serve the church. Just look at our wall. Your picture is the last one in the line of pictures. After all we've done for you, how dare you speak to us like that?"

Now, I will tell you, that I know it seems contrary, but I would rather have that woman speak to me that way than to have all those nice polite comments. Because at least I could tell through her agitation, through her anger, she heard me, heard my words. I could tell she wasn't ignoring my message and pretending that I was still that same little kid who went to Sunday school at First Christian Church. She saw me as the preacher that day, in spite of the horrible sermon that day. In that moment when she confronted me in anger, I appreciated the fact that She ignored what she thought she knew about me and took my words at face value.

And I think the same needs to be done with our story today. We do the story of Samuel a disservice, we discredit it when we just assume that it is a great story about a young boy God has called to be a prophet. This story is not a cute story. In fact, it is a rather dangerous, in your face story that doesn't bring the best news. You see, we like to cut this story off at verse 10 to keep it tame but there is nothing about this story that is tame. Let's read on through verse 20.

You see, Samuel's first words as a prophet were about death and destruction. He literally tells Eli, "You are going to die because Eli failed in his role as the priest in the Temple. Eli has failed in his calling to speak out for justice, to speak out in love and peace. Eli has not lived up to his calling.

The words Samuel was told to say, called to say to Eli couldn't have been easy for him. After all, Eli had been his mentor, his care-giver ever since Samuel came to the Temple at the age of 3. They had a relationship. There was a connection between the two. So I'm sure it wasn't easy for Samuel to know that his first words as a prophet would damage, possibly destroy that relationship. Samuel's first words as a prophet were of death and destruction and he had to find the courage, find the strength to say these words to someone who was important to him. Samuel had to have understood that there would be consequences to his and Eli's relationship because of his words.

Not an easy task by any means.

I have often wondered what was going through Samuel's mind during this time. Should he ignore what he had just heard? Should he pretend that these words were not really from God? Could he live with himself if he did not say these words, knowing that by not saying them, he too was failing in his role as a prophet of God? I wonder if Samuel thought there was a way to sugar coat these words so as to not damage or destroy their relationship.

What should Samuel do in this situation?

The answer to this question comes from the least likely of places. The answer comes from Eli. What I love about this text is that Eli see that Samuel is distressed

and simply says, “Spit it out!” He simply says, “Tell me what God told you. No matter how painful it may be, it is God’s word and I need to hear it.

You see, I think the reason why Eli can say this is because even though Eli has failed in his role as priest, even though he has not been a prophet for God, Eli understands, Eli knows that there is power in God’s word. It is God’s word that is the light that brings us out of the darkness. It is God’s word that is a lamp unto our feet. It is God’s word that brings forth transformation and new life.

Eli understood that it was dark times for his people. It was a time of religious corruption. It was a time of political unrest. It was a time of social upheaval. It was a time of spiritual desolation. We are told that the word of God and visions from God were rare during that time. It was a dark dark time and the only hope was a word from God, a word that would bring forth hope, bring forth transformation, bring forth new life.

And that word had been given to Samuel. This is why Eli encouraged Samuel to speak. I think he needed hope just as much as the people of God did during that dark time.

So Samuel finds the courage to speak to Eli, the courage to say the words. Although Samuel’ words would first bring forth death and destruction, these same words would also bring forward light and life. Samuel finds the strength to hold

steady and say these words because I think Samuel knew deep down that this time of unrest, this time of injustice, this time of brokenness was not what God intended. And if he didn't have the courage to say these words, nothing was or would ever change so that new life could come forward.

We are told that The word of God was rare during that time. What God's message to Samuel represented for all of God's people was hope, was a chance at a new beginning, was a chance to live and become the people God created them to be, a people of love, a people of peace, and a people of justice. Samuel's words represented a change and a way for the Kingdom of God to come to a reality for all of creation. That's why it is so important to speak as a prophet of God. Bringing about transformation is what it means to be a prophet and a person of God. To speak words of hope, to speak words of love, to speak words of justice during the dark dark times, knowing that your words have the power to bring forth new life.

Now, even as I say this, say things like we as people of faith should speak out for justice, we as people of God should speaking out as prophets, I assume that it should be an some easy task for us but I'll be the first to admit it, that it is far from easy. We know that when the time comes, in that moment when we are called to speak out, our mouths get dry, our knees begin to shake. In that moment when we have been given the words to say by our God, we also know that if we say something about the injustice we see, we might make someone upset, we might

disrupt our comfort zones. and let's face it, no one wants that. No one wants to invite trouble. No one wants to be that person.

It is so much easier if we stay quiet, keep our mouths shut, and ignore all the brokenness around us...

As I have thought about this, I will admit that I talk a big game but in fact, I've never had to speak up or speak out against an injustice. I take for granted that I have it pretty good.

I've never had to say the words that would help break a loved one out of a cycle of addiction. I've never had to say the words that would help break a loved one out of a cycle of abuse. I have never had to say the words to anyone, "This is not right. This is not what God intended.

I would like to think that if the time came, if it ever came, I would have the courage to stand up and speak out but I can't say for certain.

Because I'll be honest, in my lifetime, I have never really known any true prophets from God. Don't get me wrong. I have known and still know plenty of good church folks who would give the shirt off their backs to someone in need but I have never met or experienced any true prophets of God.

And this breaks my heart because I think we are living in a time very similar to Samuel's. We are living in time of social upheaval, in a time of political unrest. We are living in a time when the church and all its prophets are silent.

We need prophets of God. Men, women, children, youth, all the people of God to stand up and speak even though it might rock the boat or stir some pots. We need prophets of God. Men, women, children, and youth, all the people of God to say those unsettling words that call us to realize that there is something wrong here, that the way we are living is not according to God's plan of peace and love.

We need prophets from God. Men, women, children and youth to speak up and have the courage to say the words that will break the cycle of injustice and hurt that seems to be ravaging God's creation right now.

We need prophets from God to shout the word of God from the mountaintops because we know it is the only way there can be light and life for all of God's people.

It breaks my heart that in my lifetime, I have not met any true prophets of God. But maybe just maybe...I am seeing some today.

Maybe just maybe, I am seeing men, women, children, and youth who believe that there is hope, that there is new life, that there is transformation available for all of God's children if we have the courage, have the strength to

Speak out, to bring the light of God to chase away the darkness, to speak of love, grace, peace, to say the words even if we rock the boat or stir a few pots.

Maybe just maybe I am seeing some true prophets of God right here, right now.

Because in the words of Martin Luther King Jr. as he was sitting in a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama,: “There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven" and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.

Things are different now. The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power

structure of the average community is consoled by the church's often vocal sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. I meet young people every day whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust.

I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future.

We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

I know these words were written in 1963 but Martin Luther King Junior could be talking to us today in 2015. We as the Church have lost our voice at prophets of God, as prophets of peace, as prophets of love, as prophets of justice.

But, Maybe just maybe, I am seeing before me true prophets of God. Men, women, children and youth, ready to answer the call to speak of love and peace, ready to rock a few pots and stir a few pots.

Maybe just maybe, I am seeing before me true prophets of God. Men, women, children and youth who know that their words represent hope, represent transformation, that their words represent new life for all of God's creation.

Maybe just maybe, I am seeing before true prophets from God, sitting right here, ready to disturb the status quo.

And if that is true, may we always have the courage and the strength to speak the word of God to the people of God. Because, no matter what the situation may be, we know deep in our hearts that it is the only word, the only way to chase away the darkness. Amen.