



“Words That Rattle Us”

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1 Samuel 3:1-11, 19-20

When Annaleigh was five-years-old, she came home from our church in Atlanta one Sunday with some interesting questions after Mrs. Virginia, her Sunday School teacher, taught the story of Samuel and Eli. Annaleigh was beginning to notice that people have different ways of speaking and she became curious about accents. She asked Amanda if people from other countries sound differently when they talk because she noticed that Miss Lily, one of her teachers at her weekday preschool, said words she didn't understand. Amanda explained that Miss Lily was from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Annaleigh also wanted to know where Miss Maria, another preschool teacher and nursery worker at the church was from. Amanda explained that Maria was from the country of Argentina. “Oh,” said Annaleigh. “Well, mommy, what country is Mrs. Virginia from?” Amanda replied, “What do you mean?” And Annaleigh said, “You know, Mrs. Virginia, she says words like Eli and Samuel (in a southern accent).” Amanda looked at Annaleigh and said, “Honey, Mrs. Virginia is from Alabama.”

Words are powerful. Words mystify us. Words enliven us. Words make us laugh. Words make us cry. Words bring us together. Words tear us apart. Words spur us to action. Words rattle us and shake us to the core. And there was a lack of words from God in the days of Eli and Samuel. The time for miracles was over. There were no burning bushes, pillars of fire, no columns of smoke, and no parting of seas. So how were the people of Israel going to hear God? And how do we, today, hear God and live out God's vision in the world? We do so with courage and in community.

First, God's word to the world is realized through courage. This chapter in the book of Samuel begins, “The Lord's word was rare at that time, visions weren't widely known.” God was distant and leadership was missing because the people of Israel were tired of Eli, the Chief Priest of the temple in Shiloh, and his no-good sons. They took the best meat from the sacrifices for themselves and they took advantage of the people who frequented the holy temple. The priestly family was not listening to God.

And then Samuel was born to the barren Hannah after she had prayed to God for a child. It was Eli who said that her prayers would be answered. Because of God's blessing of a son, Hannah dedicated Samuel to the temple to be a priest to Israel and an apprentice to Eli. But as Samuel grew, God seemed more and more absent. Samuel had yet to hear the voice of God in his life and was not living up to his name, which meant, “heard by God,” because God had yet to talk. How could Samuel ever become a prophet of God when God had ceased to speak? Depressed and hopeless, the young Samuel went to sleep in the Sanctuary. Sad and alone he snuggled up to the Ark of the Covenant hoping to hear the whispers of God. And he fell asleep.

Suddenly, a loud voice shattered the gloom of the temple. “Samuel, Samuel!” Immediately and instinctively the boy replied, “Here I am!” Samuel thought it was just the aged Eli, his mentor and caregiver, shouting in his labored sleep. Perhaps he was just fevered and needed a sip of water to cool his tongue. Maybe he needed a warmer blanket thrown over his feet. Samuel had heard this demanding voice before, and he went reluctantly to attend to his elder. “I’m here, Eli! You called me,” he said, maybe a little too loudly to show his displeasure of waking up. “I did not call you, boy! What are you doing here? Go back to bed!” Eli said gruffly.

But no sooner had Samuel escaped Eli’s room when the voice came again, “Samuel, Samuel,” this time seemingly more insistent. And Samuel dutifully went back to Eli’s room and said again, “I’m here; you called me.” “No I did not call, my son. Go back and lie down.” A questioning tone began to rise in Eli’s voice, but Samuel was too tired and too disgusted to hear it. He trudged back to his room and flopped into bed. A third time the voice came, much louder now. “Samuel, Samuel!” For the young priest, it was too much. He stomped into Eli’s room, glared at the blind priest and said through clenched teeth, “I’m here; you called me.” He probably wanted to add other less appropriate words, but his priestly calling closed his mouth.

The old man responded differently this time. Although his eyes were dim his heart was filled with wisdom. “Go and lie down,” he said. “If the voice comes again, say exactly these words, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” Samuel froze, astounded and afraid. Could it be that the Lord was calling him? Could it be that God’s silence was at last broken? Could it be that he, a mere boy, was receiving the very word of God? He went excitedly back to his bed filled with fear and hope and he waited.

Then out of the darkness the voice spoke a fourth time, “Samuel, Samuel.” Samuel seemed to have been so terrified at the voice that he did not quite respond as Eli had suggested. He said, “Speak, for your servant is listening,” leaving out the name of the speaker altogether, leaving out the name of the Lord. I’m sure he couldn’t believe that it was God at all! But it was! It was indeed God, and the words that Samuel heard were frightening and hopeful. The words made his head spin! God said, “I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone daring to hear it tingle.”

It sounds weird to have our ears tingle. The word for tingle in Hebrew is *tsalal*. It means a piercing pain, a vibration, a shaking, or a rattling. It was a message for Samuel to cleanse the temple and bring God back to Israel. It was a message that had Samuel on pins and needles and would provide a spiritual acupuncture that would prick the blatant injustices but also bring hopeful healing. God’s voice and God’s message rattled Samuel to the core.

Being a prophet is dangerous work. Being the church is dangerous work. And courage is needed to bring a word from God that will rattle the people. The church can be a risky, dangerous place, what with the living God roaming about. The church can be a dangerous place with the Lord calling us each by name. The church can be a dangerous place with the rattling voice of God waking us from our sleep. God wants us to wake up! It’s dangerous to be a sleeping church! Are we awake? Are we ready to hear the voice of God? We might hear something that is not what we had in mind. And we are likely to hear something we do not want to hear, calling us to take

action and do something we do not want to do, with people we would like to keep at arm's length. Really listening can leave us rattled. It takes courage to be the church and to hear God.

To hear and live out the word of God in our midst not only requires courage, but it is enacted in community. Richard Boyce, a professor at Union Presbyterian Seminary, who wrote a commentary on this text from 1 Samuel, noticed that the birth of Samuel's new role and his new prophetic office was a cooperative affair. He says, "While Eli has failed to pass on faithfulness to his own flesh and blood, he now serves as a spiritual parent for his young charge, Samuel. Though Eli's eyes may be failing him, his knowledge of the Lord, and his experience of the revelation of God's word, are not. It takes both the attentiveness of the young Samuel's ears and the wisdom of the old priest's heart and mind to birth this new office in the service of the Lord." He says further, "Likewise, it takes both the authority of this failing priest and the obedience of this youthful protégé to bring the Lord's judgment to fruition. It takes a community to bear such a task." You see, the young and inexperienced Samuel did not have all of the answers and the blind and despondent Eli was the only one who could introduce Samuel to God. They needed each other to fully realize the words of the Lord to the people of Israel.

We need each other to hear the voice of God. We need our church, our faith community to help us listen and understand. Samuel needed Eli's help to discern God's voice. You and I need each other's help. Jesus didn't preach the realm of God alone. Jesus called the outsiders, the fisherman, the tax collectors, the sinners, and prostitutes. He called together a ragtag group of followers who were all given tasks in God's plan. We all have work to do and the Word brings us together.

Not only did the word of God come to Samuel in a profound way but I can't stop thinking about how the word of God has come to us in a profound way through Jesus Christ. God's words point us to THE Word, to Christ. "In the Beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God!" Christ continues to rattle our lives with his words for us to "Come and See," "Follow me," and "Give up all you have and join me." Christ continues to rattle our lives by saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Christ continues to rattle our lives by saying, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do!" The Word of God, Jesus, rattles our lives and calls us into action. These rattling words bring us to Jesus today.

Have you been rattled to the core by words? Shaken? Put on pins and needles, ears ringing, a deep vibration in your spirit? Have you, in your life, heard the words – "You have cancer. I don't see the baby's heartbeat on the sonogram. I'm sorry, you're fired. Mom's dying. Your home is destroyed. The ceasefire crumbled. Your son was shot for no reason. You can't get married here." Have you heard words that rattled you? Maybe God is trying to tell us something in the rattling of our spirits.

Samuel was rattled, Eli was rattled, and Israel was rattled. But they trusted in God and were able to hear not only the rattling of a terrifying message but hear the vibrations of hope, hope that God is doing a new thing. God is waking us up out of our sleep, standing in our rooms, calling our names, Samuel! Samuel! And Church! Church! Calling our names to reveal a divine hope in the midst of fear. God is saying, "Come and see!" "Follow me!" "Come and join in what I am doing in the world." "Listen with one ear tuned to the fear and awe of the Lord and the other ear

tuned to the hope of justice and a divine future.” God is rattling over the chaos of the world with the divine words “Let there be light!” And there was. And it was good. And when the words of God rattle us to our core, let us learn from Samuel and Eli and respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Amen.