

Rise and Fall

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Readings: Acts 1:1-14
I Samuel 3:1-20

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Before we turn to our second text for today, I need to ask forgiveness because today I'm going off lectionary on a significant liturgical day. This Sunday is Ascension Sunday on the church calendar; the day we remember and celebrate Christ's ascension 40 days after his resurrection. But you already know this if you've been paying attention to the first reading and the hymns. Thankfully Jeff is a more faithful liturgical disciple than I.

Today, in this congregation, we are also celebrating the work and ministry of our pastoral residents, past and present. It's what we call Residents Sunday. It's Elizabeth's last Sunday with us after two years packed with the familiar and surprising. Louisa and Joanne are at their midpoint and we look forward to their next year with us. And we remember and pray for Steve, Jackie and Sonya; Tara, Adan and Jamie.

Now for my second sin—in thinking of a passage that speaks to our situation as a congregation that seeks to train and support young pastors—I settled on I Samuel 3, a text that Susan Rice preached on just a few weeks ago. If you don't remember her sermon, perhaps you need to join me in requesting forgiveness. I'm approaching the text from a different angle, not a better or more accurate one, just a different one. This text is worthy of our consideration again because it speaks to our work together as a church of the crucified, risen and ascended Christ.

In our text for today we have a story of a rise and a fall. We are used to focusing on the rise of young Samuel to the status of prophet. But the story is also about Eli, the priest whose term is coming to a tragic

end. The story begins with Hannah, a woman depressed, anxious and angry as she is barren and forced to live with the shame of her condition. At the temple, she is noticed by Eli, her priest, who mistakes her desperate prayer for drunkenness. Impressed by her devotion, he promises her the Lord will hear her prayer and grant her request for a child. As Eli predicts, Hannah gives birth to a son, Samuel, and at a young age she hands him over to Eli for training and supervision (the first account in Scripture of a pastoral residency program, or more correctly, a priestly residency program. I wonder if Eli had a stable staff in place to provide meaningful mentoring, if he was able to provide adequate structure, timely and constructive evaluation. Did he help Samuel with his sermons, teach him how to do pastoral care, understand a complicated budget and talk to him about systems theory so he could better understand the congregation at Shiloh? Do you think Eli taught Samuel how to speak slowly and clearly so that he could be heard and understood?) I don't know, but we do know that Eli taught Samuel how to listen. Samuel is the one who hears God calling him in the night. As Susan has reminded us, it's a great story about call and what it means to hear and respond to God's voice, and a turning point in Samuel's development as a leader. But as Samuel continues his rise, as his sense of call develops and his

awareness and recognition of God's voice increases, Eli, his priest and mentor is failing and falling.

Here again the story from I Samuel 3, and several verses from chapter 4.

1 Samuel 3:1-20

3Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. ²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the 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. ⁴Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵and 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. ⁶The 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." ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The 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. ⁹Therefore 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. ¹⁰Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

¹¹Then 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. ¹²On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end.

¹³For 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. ¹⁴Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." ¹⁵Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." ¹⁷Eli 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." ¹⁸So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

¹⁹As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

4And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. In those days the Philistines mustered for war against Israel, and Israel went out to battle against them....

¹⁰So the Philistines fought; Israel was defeated, and they fled, everyone to his home. There was a very great slaughter,...¹¹The ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

¹²A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line, and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with earth upon his head. ¹³When he arrived, Eli was sitting upon his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. When the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. ¹⁴When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, "What is this uproar?" Then the man came quickly and told Eli. ¹⁵Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set, so that he could not see. ¹⁶The man said to Eli, "I have just come from the battle; I fled from the battle today." He said, "How did it go, my son?" ¹⁷The

messenger replied, "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great slaughter among the troops; your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured." ¹⁸When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate; and his neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man, and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Samuel is a young man on the rise. He represents our hope for our children and the young among us. He's what we hope for our children just baptized, for our youth, for our graduates, he's what we hope for all of our pastoral residents. Samuel is described as growing in the presence of the God and growing in stature and favor with Lord (2:26). Nurtured by Eli, he is open and receptive, humble and obedient. The Lord knows him by name and through him promises to do a new thing in Israel. We are quick to identify with him. We want to be Samuel: known, named and called by God to do great things.

The counter theme to Samuel's rise is Eli's fall. If Samuel represents our hopes for our future, Eli stands for what we fear we will become;

irrelevant and inept, steadily losing vision and judgment. In his first appearance in chapter 1, Eli mistakes Hannah's devotion for drunkenness, a severe lapse of pastoral judgment. Meanwhile, Eli's own sons, themselves young priests, are abusing their office and the women who serve in the temple. While Samuel is great in growth, they are great in their sin. They are ruthless, brazen and cynical. Priests gone wild, they embody every parent's fear and insecurity about the future of their children. Eli attempts to rebuke his sons, but he is powerless; a devastating feeling for a parent or a priest. He likely lies awake at night an anxious parent and failing priest. It has been a long time since he has received a word or vision. He is failing and falling.

It is in our text for today that the trajectories of Samuel and Eli cross, as Samuel is rising and Eli falling. But rather than a collision or conflict, it is a graceful meeting. It begins in the night when the word of the Lord is rare and visions scarce. Eli, the keeper of the priestly tradition has lost sight and strength. So the Lord speaks to young Samuel but Samuel does not recognize the voice. He turns to Eli, the one who can't see and has trouble hearing. Experienced Eli knows what to say, he knows what to do and he gives proper and careful instruction to Samuel. Samuel relies on Eli, and Eli delivers the very

words Samuel is to use in response to the Lord's voice. The young rising Samuel is dependent on old falling Eli. So Samuel receives the word of the Lord and it is a hard, harsh word. One he'd rather not receive. One that keeps him awake the rest of the night. He's a pastor with a difficult message to deliver, a prophet with a hard word to preach. So he does what most young pastors in training would do: he hides, he avoids, he questions if it was the Lord whom he heard and saw. He hopes that it was all just a dream.

In the morning, when there's nowhere else to hide, Samuel and Eli meet again. The one rising, the other falling, they're paths intersect and Eli gives Samuel a great gift. He forces Samuel to take the lead and deliver the message. "Tell me, Samuel, all of it, hold nothing back." The priest is now dependent on his pastoral resident, Samuel, to learn the word of the Lord. The judgment makes hearing ears tingle. Eli receives this declaration of his inevitable fall with remarkable grace. He does not get defensive, promise to do better next time, or throw Samuel out for insubordination. "It is the Lord," he says, let him do what seems good to him." In this pivotal moment, Eli models what he has taught young Samuel, faithful obedience.

Together they learn the word of the Lord. Together, they face the Lord's hard, powerful will. And from this critical meeting point they

continue on in different directions. Samuel increases in power and speaks with such authority that none of his words fall to the ground. Eli continues his temple service in grief and humiliation, finally falling off his chair to his death when his sons die in battle and the ark is captured.

It is easy and obvious to draw parallels between Samuel and Eli and our residency program. Our residents are young, receptive and on the rise. We, their mentors, are like Eli and headed the other way.

Hopefully we still have something valuable to teach. At times they need us to help discern what they are hearing. And yes, we rely on them to deliver the word to us. Maybe we even need to hear them speak hard words, encourage and demand them to do so. Then we are wise to follow the example of Eli and receive their words with grace.

I can recall such junctures with our past residents, those pivotal Samuel and Eli moments when they felt compelled to speak, to question and challenge us when they sensed we were falling as we failed to be the body of Christ. Such moments are not easy; they are anxious, filled with hesitation and tension. But in almost every case they are times of maturation and growth, both in pastoral and congregational identity. Thankfully, in a committee or session

meeting, at camp or a bible study class, you, like Eli, have encouraged, persuaded (maybe even demanded) that those on the rise among us speak their truth. And when we are at our best, we have received it gracefully.

In reality, our situation is fluid; our roles frequently change as we move between our Samuel and Eli moments. At times we are like Samuel and we need to look to our Elis for counsel and direction. We are on the rise, full of vision, open and receptive. And other times we are Eli. We fail and fall. We feel powerless as we lose our sight and strength. We hear piercing words of judgment and hopefully respond with grace, "It is the Lord, let him do what seems good to him."

May it be so in this next year as we continue our work together.

Like Samuel, may we pay attention to those unnamed voices in the night that startle our deepest sense of who we are.

Let us listen like Eli when the young among us challenge our way of living.

Dare to speak the truth like Samuel. Humbly receive the truth like Eli.

And in our rising and falling, let us find each other. For it is only together that we will hear and speak the Word of the Lord.

Elizabeth, Joanne and Louisa, may you continue to grow. May the Lord be with you and let none of your words fall to the ground.

In the name of the failed and fallen one, the Christ crucified as a criminal, the one who was raised and is now ascended. To him be the glory. Amen.