

God's Fingerprints in Our Story

Sermon by Pastor Patrick Fish

June 2-3, 2018

Pentecost 2

I Samuel 3:1-10

Grace and peace to you from God, who calls out to us by name. Who sends people and relationships to nurture our flame. Whose voice continues to speak through the noise and claim. Amen.

Move 1: Dr. Seuss

The first book I ever was able to read by myself was *See Spot Run*. I'll never forget that memory. How proud my parents were. How proud I was to finish a book cover to cover. A memory and moment I cannot wait to share with my girls.

As I got older and more skilled as a reader, I really enjoyed reading Dr. Seuss' books. They were my favorite books growing up.

Well, interestingly enough' Dr. Seuss' first book, *The Cat in the Hat*, changed the way children read.

When you think of *The Cat in the Hat*, you, like me, probably think it's a good children's book with lots of rhymes, tongue twisters, and goofy phrases. I challenge you to go home and read through the book without stumbling on one of the phrases. You email me if you can do it.

What you wouldn't know is that this book in the 1950s changed how parents taught their kids how to read.

After World War II, educators and parents started realizing that children no longer liked reading. This was a big concern. So, researchers set out to find out why this was happening.

In 1954, *Life* magazine published an article that highlighted the results. And what they found was that children thought books were too boring. Too many words and poor illustrations. That combination resulted in reading not being fun or engaging for children.

Well, then came along Theodor Seuss Geisel, whom we know as "Dr. Seuss." He made it his mission to create something different. To create a book that children couldn't put down.

Using just 236 words and fun illustrations, Dr. Seuss came up *with The Cat in the Hat*. And from then on, his books became how parents taught their children to read.

Books are important. They draw us in. They help us imagine and transcend us beyond our current reality. They teach us. They are powerful.

Move 2: Our focus this summer is story

Like books, stories are important. Stories are powerful. They have incredible weight and meaning.

And we, at St. Mark's, care about stories. Because stories have the ability to transform the human heart. It's easy to demonize a group of people. It's easy to see others as lesser when we stand a comfortable arms reach away.

But once we are in relationship, once we get to know someone—open ourselves up to a person's story—we can't help but have compassion. We can't help but love. We can't help but want to embrace that individual.

Stories matter. More importantly, your story matters. We care about your story. You aren't a number in a pew. You're not a giving unit. You are a member of this Spirit-filled community. You are a called disciple of Christ.

Each of us are people whom God has uniquely crafted. Each of us are beloved children of God with particular stories that God has put his fingerprints all over.

This summer at St. Mark's, we will be focusing on stories. Specifically, we will be looking at beautiful, memorable stories from the Old Testament. Each week we'll discover again these incredible stories in Scripture. Stories that have power. That have weight. That we reclaim. That we re-hear.

These stories aren't just about the past, but they inform us here in the present.

That is what Scripture is: the story of God and God's people. Then and now. It's not an ancient history book or a morality book. It's the story of God and us. Of God's steadfast love continuing to show up. Of God calling out to us. Of God using imperfect, real people to join in God's work.

We reflect on these stories over these summer months not because we have to. We do so because Scripture is our story. Because it's the story that breathes life into us and continues to teach, lead, and strengthen us and our faith today.

Move 3: Story of Samuel

We start this weekend with the story of Samuel. Specifically, God calling young Samuel. Before we jump into the calling story, we have to back up and give a little context.

God's people had fallen away. Common theme among the Old Testament. Common still today.

Eli is serving as high priest and is the community's religious leader. And it's a tumultuous time among the tribes and clans. There's no king in Israel. And Eli has failed to reign in his two sons, who have been abusing their power and putting themselves before God and the needs of others.

Things are out of control. Religious apathy has taken root. People have become spiritually lethargic. The Word of God was rare, and visions were not widespread. [1]

All that was about to change.

Enter Hannah. Hannah is Samuel's mother.

She was barren. You can imagine the intense grief and sorrow she felt that she could not get pregnant. She goes and prays with Eli. She laments and asks God to give her the blessing of a child. And her prayer is answered. The child she has longed for is born.

Upon learning she is pregnant, Hannah breaks into song. This is known famously as "Hannah's song," in which she gives thanks and beautifully describes the character of God. His love, his concern for the poor, and his justice on those who prey on the vulnerable.

When Samuel was born, Hannah rejoiced, but she ultimately knew that her son belonged to God. She knew that Samuel was destined for bigger things. For Godly things.

Scholar and theologian Valerie Bridgeman writes, "Samuel was known and knew God before he ever entered the birth canal. The story of Samuel doesn't start with Eli's training or with God calling out to him. Samuel's call began in the womb." [2]

All that has happened. And now Eli is an old man. His eyesight has grown dim. He is serving as teacher and mentor to Samuel, who has dedicated his life in service of God.

And young Samuel is sleeping when he hears a voice call out to him, "Samuel, Samuel."

Samuel runs to see what Eli wants, but it's not Eli calling out to him. Three times Samuel hears his name called. By the third time, I have to imagine Samuel is thinking that Eli is playing a prank on him.

When I was little, I did a similar prank. I told my younger sister that when she stood in a specific spot in her room next to her window, she could speak to magical leprechauns. It was just me downstairs speaking through the vents. She had a lot of requests that the leprechauns magically send her a new, nicer older brother. (Weird request, I know.)

But Eli wasn't being a knucklehead like me. He wasn't pulling a prank on Samuel. He knew what was happening. He imparts his wisdom onto Samuel and tells Samuel exactly what to say when the voice calls out again. Say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

A great insight and reminder that God never wanted ministry to be confined or limited to specific people. God calls all. Both the old and the young. God uses the energy of youth and the wisdom of the elderly to achieve God's purposes. God calls Samuel. But God gets to Samuel through the wisdom of Eli.

After getting clarification from Eli, Samuel goes back to bed. And God calls out to Samuel for a fourth time. This is the final time, thanks to the mentorship and guidance of Eli. When God calls out to Samuel, Samuel responds by saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

God's persistence, partnered with Eli's wisdom, result in the start of a whole new journey for Samuel. A new life in which Samuel will serve as ambassador and messenger. A prophet who listens to God's voice and then speaks those words of truth in the world.

God tells Samuel he is about to do something. And God invites Samuel to join in that work with God, that, together, people will encounter God again and the exploited will experience God's life-giving hope again.

Move 4: What can we learn from the story of Samuel?

There are so many aspects of this story that I think translate to today and teach us about faith in daily life.

For one, Samuel isn't a servant alone. He's not devoid or separate from relationships. Samuel was nurtured by his loving mother, Hannah. She brought him to a place where he had the opportunity to hear God's call. [3]

Samuel was taught by his mentor, Eli. Samuel needed a shepherd in the flesh, and Eli served that role. Teaching and, when it came time, instructing Samuel how to respond to God's call.

We are people of relationship. People created to be in community. To serve together. To be formed together.

I wonder who are those Hannah's and Eli's in your life. Who are the people who have helped form you and mentored you in the faith? For whom are we to be Hannah's and Eli's? Who in our midst could we give our time to and offer our wisdom without judgment? [4]

Things for all of us to ponder this week.

The second aspect of this profound call story that stands out is the difficulty Samuel has in recognizing God's voice. One of the reasons I love the Old Testament is because it reminds me that God uses real human beings to do God's work. Samuel's full humanity is on display. He is eager, confused, panicky, knowledgeable, and affirmed. [5]

Samuel didn't know the Lord. Yet. But with Eli's help, with how he was raised by Hannah, with God's word and persistence, Samuel is able to come to not just encounter God, but serve God in a BIG way.

I, like Samuel, find it difficult to discern God's voice above all the noise. There are so many competing sounds and noises vying to get my attention. It's said that today the average person is exposed to four thousand ads a day!

There's constant noise and things trying to distract us. Looking to draw us away from God's voice.

But, make no mistake, God continues to call out to us. Real people. To rise to God's call.

God knew you in the womb. God has a purpose and call for every one of us. As he had for young Samuel.

God's voice is calling you by name. Calling you to join in the things God is doing in our world today.

Are we making space to listen? Are we intentionally and actively practicing Sabbath?

To connect with God?

To hear God's voice calling us each by our name?

To encounter his loving embrace?

To know again God is and always will have God's fingerprints in our story?

Amen.

Resources:

[1] 1 Samuel 3:1

[2] Valerie Bridgeman. "Commentary on 1 Samuel 3:1-10 [11-20]." workingpreacher.org, June 3, 2018.

[3] Valerie Bridgeman. "Commentary on 1 Samuel 3:1-10 [11-20]." workingpreacher.org, June 3, 2018.

[4] Valerie Bridgeman. "Commentary on 1 Samuel 3:1-10 [11-20]." workingpreacher.org, June 3, 2018.

[5] Roger Nam. "Commentary on 1 Samuel 3:1-10 [11-20]." workingpreacher.org, January 18, 2015.

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