

Context, Context, Context

A sermon expositing 1 Samuel 3:1-20

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We need more Samuels in the world!

That's what I thought I was going to be proclaiming in this hour when I first read the texts for the second Sunday after Epiphany a few weeks ago. I was looking ahead so I could be prayerfully considering what word God might have for us today. As soon as I read that beautifully told story of the call of the prophet Samuel I just knew – that I would want to connect the dots between God's call of Samuel to speak truth to power in the world and God's call of us to do the same. "We need more Samuels in the world," I was ready to proclaim. But I missed the context.

Oh boy, here we go. This is one of those preacher moments – context, context, context. This where we dive into some nuance of what we know about the culture that the writer of the text lived in, or an oddity of translation from the Hebrew, or even recognize the literary setting of the piece by looking at what part of the "big story" of the book today's little story holds.

Except that's not quite what I mean today. You see, I read the story of Samuel hearing God, but thinking it was Eli before finally recognizing it was God and upon a surface reading I thought, "We need more Samuels in the world." But I try to be studious and check my biases and inclinations against what other information and perspectives might be available. So I looked over some of the original language resources I have. I'm no scholar of Hebrew, but I understand enough to read the work of those who are. There are some interesting things in the text. Many of the verbs used, translated literally, are past but *feel* a bit present and active. The story reads like something that happened, but is still happening. That's interesting, but I still come back to, "We need more Samuels in the world."

I even read beyond the borders of today's lectionary text to get a sense of the literary or biblical context. Perhaps you remember the story of the young shepherd boy, David, being selected over against all his older brothers to be king by a prophet. That prophet was Samuel, but David was the second king of Israel. Before him Samuel was instrumental in locating and naming the first, Saul, maybe you recall. But before he became a king maker Samuel was called by God to be a prophetic presence among the people in the little story we read today. You see the priestly order, those people who, in those days, stood squarely between God and the political world, had become corrupt. Eli, the head of the order, in the telling of our story today, was a good man, a good priest, but not such a good leader. "His sons" – probably an allusion to the priests under his leadership and not necessarily his children – began to understand the kind of power granted them as the ones who told the people what God was saying and who oversaw their worship. They began to use that power for personal gain to the detriment of those in their care. Eli had nothing to do with it, but he had become powerless to stop it. That's the reason God calls Samuel in today's reading, as something of a replacement of Eli. Samuel constitutes a new regime, a shift of power, a new voice for God and for the people.

You see, context does matter. It brings nuance, texture, and clarity to the story. Still, I come away with the impression that we need more people to hear the word of God and proclaim it no matter how unsettling it might be to those in power. Do we not need more Samuels in the world?

I think we do, but there's another thing perhaps even more critical in our context. You see, that's what I missed. I don't know about you, but I so often think of the "context" of scripture as a thing of the past. The cultures from which the writings come, the language, the literary setting. But if that is the only context that matters to us then we have a low view of scripture. It means that we might, at best, believe that the Bible *was* inspired by God and not that scripture *is* inspired by God presently. Certainly the development of the texts that would eventually come to be known as "The Bible" is an important part of the process of inspiration, but that process is not yet complete. The spirit of God continues to inspire the reading of these stories today in our context. I forgot about that context.

So where are we? Who are we? We're in church. That tells us that we're a community of faith. The sign out front says "Baptist", which means we're a community of faith who holds community in higher regard than doctrinal belief. Nobody here has to believe any particular thing to be a part. We disagree on a lot of things and that's ok. We also have in our context several symbols – a cross, a table, and in a few places you'll even see a more modern symbol. Striped colors – a rainbow. This is one thing we have agreed upon in the collective here at First Baptist. The rainbow is a symbol of our commitment to welcoming all people, *but* it is a symbol of welcoming all by welcoming the particular. We are not afraid here to proclaim that while all lives matter, some have been pushed to the margins in our society, in our religious traditions, dare I say our context and as such bear particular mention when expressing our welcome.

This is a bit about who we are, yes? But still it seems we need more Samuels. But this isn't all of our context. Just as the Bible was written in a particular time, it is *read* today at a particular time on a particular day. On this day we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday. Yes, it will be observed civically tomorrow, but it is right and good that we reflect on the deep faith that indwelt a modern prophet, a modern martyr who changed the world. For that reason there are some other things that stand out about our context, about who we are today. With the legacy of the civil rights movement on our hearts this morning, with the issue of race hanging in the air, some of the particularity of the community, the context in which the story of Eli and Samuel is read today becomes more clear.

We are, we have said, we believe, a people who care about those who have been marginalized. Racism matters here. We are also, and this is where the preacher calls attention to things that polite society usually leaves unsaid, a fairly homogenous community. Some of us within our congregation and near our congregation have experienced this construct we call "race" differently than the vast majority, but there is a vast majority. Friends, I know we are venturing uncomfortable territory here, but the time to venture uncomfortable conversations is upon us. Will you come with me for a few more moments? The truth of the matter is that the divide between races that has existed in the United States for centuries has been beaten back in some ways and forced to change forms a number of times, even so it remains with us today. One more hard reality and then I promise to bring this all together. Can we do one more? The attitudes and the systems and structures that have, in our society, privileged some and marginalized others by race, have largely privileged this, our beloved church.

Yes, this wonderful, beautiful, compassionate, caring, responsible, loving congregation passed on to us by some of the most generous, god-fearing, kind, and brave saints exists also as a participant in a world that has not yet ridded itself of the evil of racism. Hear me! We are describing here our context and it is important that we be fairly precise here. I have done my level best to describe in First Baptist a community that is genuinely, honestly, deeply caring, which happens to also, like so many other churches, have work left to do in untangling itself from the pervasive racism of the culture from which we were born. It is important we get that precise not only because I don't want any of you to have the impression that I think poorly of this congregation or *any* who are close to or within it, but also because it happens to be a mirror image of part of the *context* of the story we read this morning.

Did you happen to notice the remarkable attitude of Eli in our reading? He is an upright and righteous servant of God who has unwittingly participated in, maybe even accidentally contributed to a culture of exploitation. He's a good guy! He's done the right things. He's the guy who raised Samuel for heaven's sake! He's served God and God's people for a long time. If in the moment that Samuel told him God was placing the care of God's people in the hands of another, Eli lashed out, we would understand I think. "But I have served long and hard!" We might expect to hear him shout. "Why do I deserve to be bypassed? Why shouldn't it be my voice leading the people into a new day!? I didn't mistreat all those people, it's those uncontrollable nitwits!" We could certainly understand if he were angry or even a bit defensive couldn't we?

Notice his attitude, though. He willingly, gracefully defers to the will of God. He willingly, gracefully steps aside to enhance the voice of another. Hear that!

The one who has fought the good fight happily elevates the voice of another.

He not only defers to the voice of another. If we read beyond today's lesson things get worse in the early days of Samuel's prophetic ministry. The arc of the covenant, God's very presence is stolen by the Philistines. When word reaches back to the old guy whose been bypassed he doesn't respond saying, "That's somebody else's problem now!" No, he is so shocked by the terrible news that he falls back and dies. He willingly elevates the voice of another, but remains so engaged with the cause that his life literally depends on it.

The Elis of our world are those who elevate the voices of others crying out against the very systems that have privileged them. There are Samuels in Rochester already crying out against the injustices of racism and while we're at it classism and sexism too. Perhaps we could use a few more Samuels still, but dear friends I know for certain that we need more Elis in the world.

Amen.