

Epiphany II January 18, 2009

This week I was really grabbed by that long story from the Old Testament—the call of Samuel. I suspect that it grabbed me because it sounds a whole lot different to me these days than it ever used to.

It's really great stuff. We usually give all our attention to Samuel. After all, he *is* the hero and he has quite a story. His mother, Hannah, was barren, and she prayed for a child and vowed a vow about it. The Lord heard, and Samuel was born. Then, as soon as Samuel was weaned, Hannah left him at the sanctuary at Shiloh to serve the Lord and to help Eli. (Hanna's family lived about forty miles to the south and Hannah would visit Shiloh once a year and bring Samuel a new set of clothes. Now, this has always seemed to me an odd way to be grateful for a child; but Hannah did have five more kids in a hurry; and she doesn't seem to regret her vow.) Anyway, that's how Samuel got there. He was not from a priestly family; he had no official position in the Sanctuary at Shiloh; but he was a pious young fellow and he was the one that heard the voice of the Lord.

Then there is Eli. Bless his heart, Eli is almost a comic figure. He's an old priest who had been at it for a long time. He did the best he could with what he had, but he didn't have all that much. There were some real problems with his kids, and he was sort of letting things slide for the duration of his tenure. The Bible isn't at all kind to him; it says that he was fat, and that he couldn't see very well—which are earthy, poetic, ways of saying that he lacked vision, and that he personified the familiar, comfortable and affluent way of doing things. Eli pretty much *was* the establishment—the established religious institution, and the established social order.

Old Eli was so secure, and so comfortable, that he could snore right through two or three visits from God—the God he had served for decades—visits to the very room where he was sleeping. He could snore through that and still have less than a clue about what was going on. Not the brightest bulb in the chandelier.

On the other hand, considering what it was God had to say, it's understandable that Eli went to great lengths to avoid noticing what was happening. God's word is that Eli is doomed, and his family is doomed, and just about all his friends are doomed. The old order in Israel is going to pass away, and that's the way it is.

It turns out that it was not good enough for Eli just to show up at work every day for fifty or sixty years. It was not good enough for him to have kept things moving along the way they sort of set themselves up to move. More than that had been asked of him, more than that had been expected of him, and God was going to make a change. The Sanctuary at Shiloh was about to be under new management, and so was all of Israel.

So, the young upstart Samuel was on his way in, and poor old fat, blind Eli (and his dynasty) were on their way out. That's what God said and, before too long, that's exactly what happened.

Now, I used to like this story a whole lot more than I do now. For quite a while it was really fun to identify neatly and cleanly with Samuel—the young, insightful one that God liked best.

And it was equally easy to see that Eli and all his friends—the lazy bums—had it coming. It probably couldn't happen to a more deserving bunch of old whatever it was they were. That'll teach 'em.

But every year, Eli looks more and more familiar. Every year, that nice unambiguous good-guy—bad-guy distinction between Samuel and Eli looks less and less clear. Every year it becomes easier to understand how Eli got to thinking that the church was for him, and that he was too old to change, and that the way things are is pretty much the way they ought to be, or at least the way they will be for the duration of his watch. Every year all of that gets just a little closer to home. So every year what happened to Eli seems less delightful, and more tragic. The years will do that to you, I guess.

But it isn't all just a matter of age; there is more to it than that. I think that most all of us have a part of ourselves that is Eli, and a part of ourselves that is Samuel. The Eli part of us is the established part, the old, familiar ways of doing things part, (which maybe isn't the part with the most vision, or the best waist-line). The Samuel part of us is more flexible, and is open to new and different things. It's the part of us that can hear new voices and see new ways for life to be. Now, the fact is, much of the time, for much of what we do and need to do, Eli is the best bet. That's where we find the stability, the continuity, and the direction that our lives and our society and our church need if they are going to make it for the long haul. We need Eli—maybe not *quite* so fat and blind as in this story—but we need him.

Still, the word to us from today's lessons is simply that, from time to time, God still does the sort of thing he did with Samuel. Every now and then, God shows up and says, "It's time for a change, it's time for something different, it's time to seek new vision, and find a new direction." God still does that. Certainly not always, and Lord knows not every change is inspired by God (far from it.) But from time to time, God does this.

That's what happened to Nathanael. Nathanael was a good southerner, (they had that North / South thing in Israel, too) and as such he never expected anything of value to come from Nazareth, or any place up north. But there Jesus was, and Nathanael either had to come and see or miss the boat. So he went, and he saw, and everything was different.

And God still does this sort of thing. God still shifts things around, and aims life in new directions, and sets us to new tasks, and lets us know that the way it was isn't the way it's going to be from now on. (Now, this is one of the things about God I like less and less every year. But that doesn't seem to slow God down much; it just increases my chances of sleeping through something important.)

So, we need to listen, and we need to pay attention for that word to Samuel that happens within us. Because God just might tap us on the shoulder, or wake us up in the middle of the night, with new direction for our lives, or new priorities for our families or our work, or new ministries for our parish. He just might. There's no telling. But we do need to listen, and to be open. After all, God isn't finished with us yet, and God may well have all sorts of interesting things in store. God does that sort of thing.