



Roanoke, Virginia

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“A Tradition Both Heavy and Light”

I Samuel 3:1-10

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Every story from Samuel could use a strong dose of historical and literary context, but with both communion and confirmation as part of today’s celebrations, I am going to go light on context and heavy on analogy.

I will begin with Eli, the High Priest of Israel. Eli has the Confirmation responsibility of passing on the tradition of his faith to others... in his case, other priests. Those other priests include his sons, but his sons have been disasters for reasons that we have read about in the news. You’ve seen the headlines about televangelists scamming listeners by promising healing or prosperity in exchange for donations, and you’ve seen the headlines about priests abusing their positions for sexual favors. Well, now you are up to date about how Eli’s grown sons have abused their religious authority and why Eli is giving his attention to an adopted son.

Now, to our story:

Now 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. ⁹ Therefore 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.

¹⁰ Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

I know that when we stand to recite the Apostle’s Creed, we use words and phrases in the way that the Amish community chooses their clothes and tools. We are purposefully out of date as far as the culture is concerned.

- I know that when we say, “[I believe in God the Father Almighty](#),” that God is neither male nor female and all people, no matter their gender, bear within them the image of God.
- I know that when we say the “[Holy Ghost](#),” there has been many a child and a few adults who have thought at least once “[Boo](#)” before they said “[Amen](#).”
- I know that when we say, “[he ascended into heaven](#)” and “[descended into Hell](#),” we are using flat world imagery, and that “[descended into Hell](#)” has shaky biblical grounding and is better understood as a theological affirmation that Jesus knows what it is to feel abandoned by God.
- And I know that when we say, “[I believe in the Holy Catholic Church](#),” that it would be clearer to say “[I believe in the Holy Universal Church](#)” so as not to make folks think that we Presbyterians are Roman Catholic wannabees.

Yet, I also know that when I stand and use the words and phrases of the Apostles’ Creed, I do so in unison with the child my father once was who recited the creed in his small Appalachian church and my mother who recited it as a girl in her high steeple church in Atlanta. In fact, I am using the same words and phrases of generations of Christians who have played Eli’s role in passing on the faith that has so shaped my life in powerful ways.

With those generations,

- I say the Lord’s Prayer (using “debts” instead of “trespasses” reflecting Presbyterian tradition),
- sing centuries-old hymns with puzzling phrases (what does “[Here I raise my Ebenezer](#)” even mean?),
- light candles on an Advent Wreath,
- pray before meals,
- and participate in Second Presbyterian traditions like
 - attending the Christmas dinner and pageant, and the pancake breakfast,
 - attending worship outdoors on Picnic Sunday,
 - and gathering in Kirk Hall for Kairos Worship.



Tradition is something I hang onto so as to remain in connection with God and with those who have passed on to me my faith.

Tradition can be especially helpful (and, as I will discuss later, particularly harmful) in times such as Eli's when visions are few and a fresh Word of the Lord is rare. At such times, tradition can be helpful in the way a sailboat is helpful on a windless day; you may not be moving but at least you have a boat to keep you afloat.

Tradition needs to be **heavy**. There are stories to tell, wisdom to impart, and disciplines to practice so as to weigh on a people's conscience and leave its mark on an individual's soul.

Tradition weighed in on Samuel. Let's say, Samuel has been confirmed. Samuel has been an attentive confirmand and has so listened to Eli's voice that it has become almost like what children used to say of Dr. Hollingsworth. When they heard Dr. Holly's voice, they sometimes thought they were hearing the voice of God.

Eli is for Samuel a dependable guide as to

- what to believe,
- how to pray
- and how to follow disciplines that bring order and structure to life.

Eli has taught him what is right and wrong and how to live as an ethical and responsible member of the community. Maybe there were occasions when Samuel rolls his eyes at Eli, muttering "OK Boomer," under his breath, but unlike Eli's sons, he respects Eli. He trusts Eli, and trusts the tradition that Eli is passing on to him.

But any tradition that is attentive to the voice of God must not only be **heavy** but must also be *light*. Prayers can become rote, can't they? Rituals can become religious To-Dos. Faith begins to feel less like a relationship with God and more a litmus test of whether you are in or out. It can become a list of beliefs or a sign of one's national or political allegiance more than a commitment to the God of all people and nations. Faith becomes something you hold onto out of anxiety, fear, or pride—or because you can work it—rather than something that holds you, assuring you that you are loved, imparting wisdom, bringing peace, and offering direction.

The truth is, the tradition Eli is passing on to Samuel is a dying one... dying precisely because it has not moved and God's fresh voice is not being heard... with one terrible result being that the powerful priests who are Eli's sons are not only the tradition's defenders, they are the tradition's abusers. One of the most profound insights of Reformed theology is that sin is a parasite in that it feeds off of virtue. Any good cause—any good government—can be corrupted. Any law can be perverted. And when a human system stands still—gets frozen—that's when it is most vulnerable because *sin is so cleverly adaptive*. Why do telemarketers call you on lines that look local; why do payday loans charge high interest rates to folks who can barely pay the principle; why do some poor, some rich, and some corporations abuse the welfare systems that are there for their benefit for their own selfish gain and in ways that avoid responsibility?

Because they can. Selfish people like Eli's sons find ways to game the system—and church tradition is a system.



That is why Tradition has to be not only **heavy** but also *light*. For a tradition to move to places that protect and enhance life, the sturdy boat needs wind in its sails. This is true of Law, of Government, of one's community, of the system that is one's family... and of one's faith and church. Samuel is right to listen to Eli so as to have a boat of faith to sit on. But as an emerging adult of faith,

who must be responsible for the way he lives his life,
who must take responsibility for his own words and actions,
who must be responsible for the impact he will make on others
and the world he lives in,

he now needs to listen for the voice of God's Spirit. In Hebrew, the word for "Spirit," *Ruah*, can also mean "Wind." Samuel needs to hear the voice of God to get wind in his sails to move him to where not only he, but also Israel, needs to go.

A night comes when God speaks authentically, individually, and freshly to Samuel. Because it seems God had not been speaking lately, it makes sense that when Samuel hears God speak to him, he mistakes God's voice for his adopted father's.

"**Samuel, Samuel**," the voice says.

"**Here I am**," Samuel yells to Eli, waking him up because Eli didn't actually call his name. "**It is just the wind**," Eli tells Samuel, "**go back to sleep**."

Samuel hears his name called again, "**Samuel**." Again, he says, "**Here I am**" to Eli, and again he is told to go back to sleep.

How often has the church said "**Go back to sleep**" to those who hear a fresh word of God that will move the church to where it needs to go?

- "**The Church should include Gentiles, and they shouldn't have to be circumcised or dress or eat as Jews**," Paul said.
 - "**No**," said the other apostles at first, "**You must be a Jew before you can be a Christian. Now go back to sleep**."
- "**The world is round**," Giordano Bruno said.
 - "**No, the world is flat, now go back to sleep**." (The way he went back to sleep was by being killed as a heretic.)
- "**Worship should be in the language of the people and people should not be told they can purchase their salvation**," Martin Luther said.
 - "**No, we worship in Latin and we need the money**," the pope said. "**Now, go back to sleep**."
- "**Women should preach**," said churches who recognized God's call in female voices.
 - "**No, only men preach the Gospel, now go back to sleep**."

To the old priest's credit, when Samuel wakes him up a third time, Eli realizes that Samuel is hearing a voice that is not his... *and* is a voice to which Samuel *should* be listening—perhaps a voice to which all of Israel should listen. So, Eli tells Samuel that the next time he hears the voice speak, he is to say, "**Speak, your servant is listening**." That Samuel does, God starts talking and tells him



that Tradition will change, and Eli's family will be left behind. Samuel tells this to Eli and, again, to the old priest's credit, he tells Samuel to follow God's lead. Sails inflate, and not only Samuel, but all of Israel are led to a new place.

Today, the first Sunday of 2020, is Confirmation Sunday. This is in itself a break with tradition because we took advantage of having a smaller than usual Confirmation Class to try something new and reduced the class from a school year to a single semester.

But what has not changed is that those who are being confirmed have received what Samuel received from Eli. They have been taught the Christian tradition. The Confirmation teachers and pastors (particularly Rev. Thompson) have passed on to the confirmands the stories and doctrines of our faith, and wisdom on how we Presbyterians go about things. We've given the faith tradition the weight it deserves.

Yet, the pastors and teachers have also tried to honor the voice of God's Spirit in being clear with the Confirmands that the future of the church (indeed of their families, their country and the world) will, for better or worse, be shaped in some way by them. They will have many voices trying to direct them, including folks like Eli's sons who will use the authority of their position to try to manipulate them to serve their selfish agendas. They were encouraged to listen for the fresh Word of God to guide them.

- They might need to be the generation that wakes up and hears a fresh word about what we need to do to take care of this planet even if some tell them the planet is fine and to go back to sleep.
- They might be the generation that wakes up and hears a voice calling them to build community in a violent world polarized by tribal politics, even though voices will tell them to pick sides and go back to sleep.
- They might be the generation that wakes up and hears how to build and take care of families even as family is re-defined, though voices might tell them to go back to sleep.
- They might be the generation that will hear a voice that teaches them how to pray and worship in freshly authentic ways, even though voices tell them that the way we've always done those things are the only ways to do them and to go back to sleep.

We want these young people to feel the weight of a faith tradition because they will be sheep led to cultural slaughter without having some grounding and inherited wisdom. But we also want them to have the kind of relationship with God where they can recognize God's fresh voice, and then say, "[Speak, for I am listening.](#)"

May we all listen to that voice.

