

1 Samuel 3:1-19

“Darkness Holds Promise”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

This week we continue the midweek Advent theme, “Holy Darkness.” As we saw last week in the Genesis story, God was in the darkness bringing forth light. God created Night and Day, and said, “*It is good.*” The Genesis story teaches us that before the entrance of human sin, darkness was the good reality out of which God brought light and life.

During Advent we remember that Jesus is light in the darkness, that Jesus overcomes the darkness of sin and death that human fear creates. Darkness is fearful because we have not relied upon God’s voice and presence in the darkness. Human sin and death have made us fearful of what we cannot see and hear in the darkness. The Advent season, with its image of light and prayer, encourages us to watch and prepare for the coming of Christ into our lives.

Today’s reading is about the call of Samuel. It is a reminder of the “Holy Darkness” out of which God calls his people to be faithful and prophetic in this world. Today’s reading reminds us, “darkness holds promise” – the promise of God’s voice and grace.

Samuel was a boy serving in the temple under Eli, a high priest of Israel from the city of Shiloh. The reading also says that in those days, the word of the Lord and visions were rare occurrences. However, though Eli was a high priest, his sons took advantage of their father’s role by taking the best meats from the sacrifices to eat, and by committing adultery with the women who served at the entrance of the temple. God had warned Eli of his sons’ sinful behavior, but because Eli had not restrained his sons, God promised to end the priestly lineage of the house of Eli.

Against this sinful darkness engulfing the temple, God remained steadfast, choosing the boy Samuel to become a prophet. God had not abandoned Israel to the sinful darkness of Eli’s sons. Rather, God came in the darkness of night to the temple calling Samuel’s name, “*Samuel! Samuel!*” God rested the future of his message not upon the sinful present generation, but upon the youthful faith of a young boy. Though Samuel did not yet understand God’s voice, with purity of faith, he said, “*Here I am,*” and as Eli taught him, replied, “*Speak, for your servant is listening.*”

There is much we can learn from this ancient text. For example, whether we are young and new to prayer, or whether we are older and struggling with faith and life, discerning the voice of God is not always easy. Too often we do not listen to what the Lord is trying to say in our lives. Too often

the world is a noisy and distracting place, drowning out God's small voice in the fearfulness of our nighttime anxieties, worry and dread.

Yet Samuel replied to the Lord, "*Speak, for your servant is listening,*" and God told Samuel of the judgment that would be set against Eli, his sons and their house, because Eli had known what was right and did not do it. Eli knew of his sons' sin and had not sought to restrain them. It is a sobering moment in the history of Israel, and if this were the end of the story, there would seem to be little hope in the darkness, and God would indeed seem very wrathful and unforgiving.

Yet there is grace in this story. Eli accepted God's judgment and Eli also encouraged the faith of a young person named Samuel. As Samuel matured, God was with him "*and let none of his words fall to the earth.*" Samuel was steadfast to God and God was steadfast to Samuel.

Though this story is in many ways far removed from the 21st century, it has much to teach us about walking faithfully with God. Like Samuel, when did you first begin to discern the Lord's voice in prayer? What have been the moments in your life when the Lord spoke to you, or when you responded to the Lord, saying, "Here I am; speak, for your servant is listening"? During our lives, over and over, we learn to pray and to wrestle with God in the darkness and nighttime moments of our lives, trusting that God is with us.

We might also say that today, as well, visions and trust in God's word do not seem widespread. Though we are aware of the sin and violence of the world around us, like Eli we may not do much to restrain or stop it. People expect God to be present in the world, yet they often remain silent in the face of sin and evil. Like Samuel, God calls us be voices of God's justice and love for the world. Yet often, we each go our own way, hoping upon our leaders, upon our wealth, upon our social position, hoping upon nearly everything except God's steadfast grace in the darkness. During Advent, we remember that God calls us to serve and speak justice and love in the darkness of world.

We are a world in need of hope. We are a world in need of God's grace and guidance in the night and in the darkness of our lives. During Advent, this story encourages us to say, like Samuel, "*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*"

The Lord is always doing a new thing, an unbelievable thing in the darkness of our lives; yet, the challenge is do we hear and see God in the darkness? For nearly two years, we have been people walking in darkness – the darkness of a pandemic of sin and death, of strife, discord and mistrust. Because we mistrust one another, we find it difficult to hear and trust the Lord's voice in one another's voices.

Yet Samuel “*let none of the Lord’s words fall to the ground.*” The story of God calling Samuel is really a story about prayer. Prayer is a bit like playing catch. God speaks and we catch God’s word, taking care not to let it fall to the ground. And we know that playing catch means going back and forth learning how the other throws, and learning to catch. We know that like playing catch, the back and forth of prayer takes time. God waits for us to quiet ourselves into the rhythm of prayer so that we might hear God’s voice in the darkness. Do you throw your concerns and fears, your hopes and dreams upon God in prayer? Do you endure in prayer? God who is faithful and just will always speak to you. But we must listen and persevere in prayer. This is the watching of Advent.

God is still speaking. God is still speaking in the darkness, creating life and light out of darkness. God is still forgiving sin and raising the dead each day to new life.

During Advent we hear the words of Isaiah (9:2), “*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.*”

The world is in need of hope in the midst of darkness and in the nighttime fears of our lives. The world is still in need of men and women who will speak words of grace, people who will not let God’s word fall to the ground.

Darkness holds promise. During Advent we respond to God’s promise, saying, “*Here I am; speak, for your servant is listening.*”

Watch and prepare your hearts. God is still speaking in the darkness. Believe and act faithfully in this world.

God is with you in the darkness, so that you can become light and hope for others. Amen.