

Sown into the Good Earth -- Christmas 1C

The story of Samuel and the sons of Eli portrays God's steadfast allegiance to the people of Israel, despite Phineas' and Hophni's degraded behavior in their capacity as priests at Shiloh. God provides a new beginning in Eli's adopted son Samuel. In the same way, God will remain faithful to us as the old year gives way to the new. Whatever strength, whatever understanding, whatever refreshment we may need to overcome our troubling conditions, God has provided and will invigorate, if we are awake enough to desire and embrace the opportunities. We can be sure that, even as the old dies away, God is already preparing us to care for ourselves and one another in ways that are fresh and new, if we will only choose them. We are positioned to become the Samuels our people need.

Likewise Jesus' life took place in a particular locality and time. It was a life subject to the worst behavior and conditions human culture has come up with. These fragile families, the situations into which Jesus and Samuel are born are evidence that every situation bears the seeds of its own redemption, and thus every life has value and merit and relevance, no matter the context in which it happens. Jesus' parable of the Sower asks us what kind of soil we are for the happy growth of the Word of God. Today's stories suggest that we ask ourselves what kind of seeds we are ourselves, whatever the soil. Are we seeing and pursuing the riches of ministry, prophetic witness and devotion that God spreads out before us, or do we, like Eli's pitiful offspring at Shiloh, habitually resign ourselves to an ongoing and ever-

disappointing scramble for personal pleasure? Whatever our individual context, whatever we're going through, our choices are just as important as if we were great. God's promises are fulfilled, not only by the likes of Jesus, and Samuel, but by the circumstances and passions and strivings of every life lived in the desire for goodness, no matter how humble, or brief, or faltering. Immanuel means God is with us, and in us permanently.

Jonathan Edwards famously pointed out that we do not choose our desires, they are products of our nature and our nurture. "The human will always is, just as the greatest apparent good for humanity always is too. We freely pursue what seems good to us. Human beings are free to do what we want. But we do not choose what we want; we do not determine our desires. We act on them, but we do not choose what our desires will be. Thus we are both free and constrained."

The Bible is a great array of narratives illustrating this truth, admonishing and encouraging parents to nurture and constrain their children to desire the greatest good for humanity and the planet. We hear both Hannah and Mary extolling God's goodness in their songs, and we watch them live out their gratitude by the risky, painful means of giving up their children to the transitions they must undergo, the grownup lives they are destined to lead. Henceforth, Samuel and Jesus are supported in their new lives, with love and understanding and a new little robe each year to keep them warm. They desire to minister to the rest of humanity and they choose to do so. Young Samuel the priest will grow into a great prophet, who will oversee Israel's transition from a tribal confederacy to a unified nation. Jesus of course will grow

into a central figure of human history, who will oversee Israel's transition from a unified (albeit occupied) nation into the nexus of a spiritual movement based on good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.

It was about the age of thirteen, I think, when my dad and I took a hiking trip together, just the two of us, a few hours' drive south of St. Louis – that's Missouri, not Obispo – and into Tennessee. By coincidence, our destination was also a place called Shiloh. One of the most terrifying, and a pivotal battle in the American Civil War took place there; it's now a park. We set up camp, cooked our supper over the fire and enjoyed each other's company, father and son. Meanwhile the temperature started dropping. Long about the middle of the night, I awoke to the sound of my dad squirming around on his cot across the tent; he was shivering with the cold. The sleeping bag I had brought along was working just fine, but somehow his was insufficient. As I recall, I got up and took everything I could find: clothes, towels, some newspapers and piled them on top of Dad til he got warmer and we could go back to sleep. It seems like a minor incident and it was. But it sticks in my memory because it's the first time I can recall caring for him instead of the other way around. I was actually part of the solution.

Like the moments depicted in our stories of Samuel and Jesus this morning, the time arrives when we desire to give more of ourselves than to take for ourselves if we're fortunate, and thenceforth each of us begins to increase in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and our fellow human beings. Not very many of us will be prophets or kingmakers. And only one child in human

history has been the begotten child of God, it's true; yet there comes a time in each of our lives we begin to minister to others, and thus the transition begins from childhood to adulthood. We are all called to minister.

This ever changing, ever new identity God rejoices to inhabit when we respond positively to the invitation: "Feed my sheep." This identity of God in us is as colorful and various and surprising as the family of humankind, as the twinkling lights on a Christmas tree or a sky full of stars. Walt Whitman, in his wondrous, self-critical genius, wrote about the naturalness and complexity of human striving. It is all imitation when compared with the desire for Grace. As Samuel and Jesus did and Hannah and Mary before them, so can we approach God with the eager desire to know who it is we are bound to become.

To You

Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that
you be

my poem,

I whisper with my lips close to your ear,
I have loved many women and men, but I love none
better than
you.

O I have been dilatory and dumb,
I should have made my way straight to you long ago,
I should have blabb'd nothing but you, I should have
chanted

nothing but you.

I will leave all and come and make the hymns of you,
None has understood you, but I understand you,
None has done justice to you, you have not done justice
to
yourself,

None but has found you imperfect, I only find no
imperfection in you,
None but would subordinate you, I only am the one who
will never consent to subordinate you,
I only am the one who places over you no master, owner,
better, God, beyond what waits intrinsically in yourself.

There is no virtue, no beauty in man or woman, but as
good is
in you,
No pluck, no endurance in others, but as good is in you,
No pleasure waiting for others, but an equal pleasure
waits for
you.