

Hearing the Bat Kol and Following the Path of Downward Mobility
1 Samuel 3 & Mark 10 | Knox-Metropolitan United Church
Regina, SK | Treaty 4 Territory | September 19, 2021 | Cameron Fraser

Samuel hears a voice.

Now on his own

He perceives it to be the voice of Eli

The elderly priest with whom he serves in the temple

After all

It is only the two of them there so who else could it be

We the reader know it to be God, but as the text has made a point earlier

*The bat Kol Elohim, the word of the Eternal was rare in those days;
visions were not widespread.*

This was a moment in the story of the people of the Temple

They who worshipped Elohim, the God who speaks

It was a moment in which bat Kol Elohim, the word of the Eternal

Was rare

The community is in disarray

Leadership is lacking in both courage and moral clarity

External advisories are a constant threat

And it is here that Samuel hears a voice

The Eli figure is an interesting one

Because the custom of the time is that Eli's sons would continue on his work

But the text suggests that they are lacking

And Eli does this hard thing of supporting and nurturing

A change in leadership

That will ultimately see his own ancestral legacy

Fade from power

There's something interesting to ponder in there

For it is Eli

Who has this sudden realization

That bot Kol, the Voice of the Eternal

Is coming

Not to him

Or his family

But to Samuel

And so he relinquishes

And steps aside

And allows his final days to seed the beginning of something new

There is a similar dynamic playing out

In the conversations between Jesus' apprentices

As they travel through Galilee

Making their way to Capernaum

Jesus has been offering hard teaching

And the text offers up their response

But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

It's a funny turn of phrase

On one hand it might be read

That they were afraid to ask

Because they didn't want to expose their lack of understanding

But when we think of what the teaching was

A teaching about Jesus' own vulnerability

About how his way would lead to confrontation with powers

A confrontation that would ultimately cost him his life and reputation

Does their fear of asking for clarification

Reveal that they might indeed understand

Even intuitively

What might be the deep implication

Because the whole journey

They are arguing over who will be the greatest

A framework that doesn't have space for the sort of challenging words Jesus is offering

I don't think we read their lack of understanding as if Jesus' teaching was too complex

But perhaps it is better understood

As their inability to take it in

Under their operating assumption of greatness, success and upward mobility

And then there's Jesus object lesson

A child in their midst

This is a scene that is often sentimentalized

Jesus bringing a well-manicured

Cherub like child

Smiling and innocent

Ched Myers

In his commentary on Mark

Suggests that what is in fact happening here

Is a challenge to centre the needs of the vulnerable

Which

In First century Jewish Palestine

Would begin with children

A group with no rights

And that community faithfulness

In fact greatness

Can be tested by the way in which such a group is protected

The question

Of centring ones own rights and privileges

Or the needs of those who are vulnerable

Is a very live question right now

We see it playing out

With a troubling ferocity

Are you asking me to set aside what I want, for someone else?

Outside my office hangs a large frame

That contains a picture of the late George Palmer

Along with academic hood from when he was presented with a Doctor of Divinity honoris causa

From St. Andrew's College

George is often referred to as the founder of Carmichael Outreach, and while he was certainly that organization's first Executive Director, I imagine that he would suggest that the founding was a community effort.

In the final years of Carmichael United Church

Their outreach program

That began simply (with George's encouragement) with a small clothing bank

Eventually some soup lunches

A food bank

And then grew from their

Interestingly all of this occurs as the other ministries of the congregation were in decline

Yet instead of cutting programs

To preserve and seek to stem the shrinking elsewhere

Time, energy and finances

Kept being directed into these programs

Which centred the needs of the vulnerable

And responded to their understanding of their call to be church

Many will know better than I how the story ends

Or perhaps it should be said about how the story turns

That instead of holding on and prolonging what became understood to be inevitable

The community makes a decision

That is not unlike Eli's choice to point Samuel towards his future

Or the teaching that Jesus' apprentices struggled to receive

Carmichael United Church ceased to be so that Carmichael Outreach might become

Last week

As we offered parting blessings to Garry and Kathy Palmer (no relation to George that I know of)

I read a blessing for New Beginnings by John O'Donahue

And I'd like to read it again today

Read against these ideas and scriptures

I think it invites us

In a time of pandemic

Economic disparity

And ecological crisis

To think about what internal resources

Might be called for

As we

Individually, Institutionally, Societally

Ponder what might be growing

As possibility

As we seek to respond

To what we hear calling and urging us forth

I wonder if there is a phrase or line that sticks out to you

I'd love to hear if that is so.

*In out-of-the-way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.*

*For a long time it has watched your desire,
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,
Noticing how you willed yourself on,
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.*

*It watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the gray promises that sameness whispered
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,
Wondered would you always live like this.*

*Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
A path of plenitude opening before you.*

*Though your destination is not yet clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is at one with your life's desire.*

*Awaken your spirit to adventure,
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.*

