

1 Samuel 3:1-10

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. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the 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. Then the LORD called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” and 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. The 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.” Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The 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. 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. Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

A physician, a civil engineer, and a consultant were arguing about what was the oldest profession in the world. The physician remarked, “Well, in the Bible, it says that God created Eve from a rib taken out of Adam. This clearly required surgery, and so I can rightly claim that mine is the oldest profession in the world.”

The civil engineer interrupted, and said, “But even earlier in the book of Genesis, it states that God created the order of the heavens and the earth from out of the chaos. This was the first and certainly the most spectacular application of civil engineering. Therefore, fair doctor, you are wrong: mine is the oldest profession in the world.” The consultant leaned back in her chair, smiled, and then said confidently, “Ah, but who do you think created the chaos?”

A little more than a year ago our church embarked on a visioning process and hired a consultant, Chris Vacher. There was a sense as we approach the 200th anniversary of our church that we need to spend time listening to God and discerning what God’s call is for us as we begin the next century of this church’s life.

Some of you have been asking where we are with this, so I want to spend the next few weeks giving you a bit of a taste. After the worship the service on October 6 we will do a more formal presentation of the strategic plan. Meanwhile, the draft strategic plan will be given to the Board members in the coming days to be discussed (and possibly passed!) at our upcoming board meeting.

I like the joke, because in a way the visioning process reminds me a bit of how we used to do the big annual OK Kids garage sale. All year long we would collect “stuff” in the basement, and then the week before the sale it would all be pulled out. I admit I would watch in horrified wonder — both repulsed and drawn to the scene! It seemed like the mess and the chaos would totally take over — but by some miracle, it would all get sorted and sold.

In a way, that's what we did in the last year and a half. We pulled out everything we do and we said to ourselves: "Holy! There is a lot here!" So, we started sorting and deciding what category stuff belonged to, and what was most important for us right now and for the future. Chris, our consultant, didn't create the chaos; he just encouraged us to clean out the basement and to take a look at what we have and who we are. Actually, he was like 'St. Linda of the Chaos' (who used to head up the garage sale!) and he helped us to see more clearly who we are, what resources we have, who we are called to be, and what steps we need to take to live into this future.

Out of this came 5 themes, each with its own objectives and action items. This fall we're going to focus on each of these themes in our worship service. So, if you hang out with us in the coming weeks you will get an idea of what is most important for us and where we feel called to go. The first theme and the one we are looking at today is the theme of **Spiritual Vibrancy**. Here is our **Objective for Spiritual Vibrancy**:

To increase opportunities for people to grow in their faith journey. This would include midweek opportunities to intentional spiritual growth pathways, leading people to become more like Jesus. A faith connection to everything that goes on at Wall Street would be established; help people — already attending, new to the church and not yet connected — to deepen their faith. This is Wall Street's primary goal.

Samuel had been living in the temple since he was a small child. His mother Hannah had been unable to have children, and she prayed in the temple. When her prayers were answered, she promised to dedicate the child and his life to God ...which meant literally sending him to the temple to serve God once he was old enough.

There wasn't a lot of spiritual vibrancy in the temple or in Israel at that time. The clues are right there at the beginning of this story. Listen to what it says: "*The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli [the chief priest], whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out...*"

It's not just that it tells us there were few visions. There is also a sense that the chief priest himself is getting dimmer — not just in his eyes and body as he ages, but in his spirit too. Eli is not a bad man, though in the chapter before and (if we read on in this chapter) we learn that *his sons are the worst of the worst*. His sons are priests who would take over from the father, but instead of serving the Lord, they serve themselves and cheat and mistreat others. They sleep with the women at the entrance of the temple, and when people bring their offerings to God — when they bring meat and bread to be burned and offered to God — they take it and eat it themselves. They are the kind of priests who take the church offering and buy themselves a sports car and expensive vacations with the money! They are slimy cheats, and Eli their father is weak and has all but given up. But there's hope.

I absolutely love the little line that says "the lamp of God had not yet gone out." There's the literal context that part of the job of the priests is to keep the light burning in the

temple and to keep the oil topped up. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, but it was flickering.

That's what many churches are like today in this country. The lamp of God has not yet gone out, but it's flickering. I want to say that for the most part this is not the fault of the churches. Our society has undergone a massive change in a short period of time, where church is no longer part of the fabric of community and life.

When I'm on vacation up at Gracefield camp, I always volunteer to lead one worship service for the camp. It's a beautiful outdoor worship space and it's a pretty low-key service. My daughter's boyfriend was up at the camp, and he came to the service. He said it was the very first worship service he had ever attended. He had never even been to a funeral! I think the closest he might have come to something resembling a church service would be a Remembrance Day service. This is not something I'm wailing and moaning about; it is just the current reality.

And actually, part of me doesn't really care if he goes to church or not. But I do care that he and other young people have not experienced a connection to the Living God. I do care that when a young person comes to a church seeking that deeper connection to a higher power, that they *find it there!* Sadly, that's not always a guarantee. Sometimes churches forget their primary purpose.

I've been rereading a book by Richard Rohr called *The Immortal Diamond*, where he takes a quote from the actress Jane Fonda to describe faith. Jane Fonda became a Christian later in life. This is what she said: "*I am frequently asked about my faith. At the end of my marriage to Ted Turner I became a Christian. For several years prior, I had begun to feel I was being lead. I felt a presence, a reverence humming within me. It was and is difficult to articulate.*" "A reverence humming within" is what Rohr picked up on. It is a beautiful description of what many of us have experienced — *that there is something more*. There is One who is beyond us, who loves us and is calling us into a relationship.

Things were looking dim at that time in Israel, but there was hope. The lamp of God had not yet gone out. There was a teenager serving God who also heard a reverence humming within and without. He didn't recognize the source of the sound of the humming. He didn't recognize the Voice. He thought it was Eli, the chief priest, calling him. Eli didn't catch on right away either, but thank God Eli was still present enough to God to be able to lead Samuel and say, 'Next time you hear that voice, say this: "*Here I am. Speak, for your servant is listening.*" That was a powerful prayer. It still is.

I am here. I am present. Not madly running off in all directions. Not distracted or dwelling in the regrets of the past or the worries of the future, but *present*. We can only meet God here, now, in the present. *I am here. I am listening. Speak.* God will never force a relationship on you or on anyone.

As much as our job is to be present, the truth is that God is always present. God invites, and our job is, in turn, to let God in. "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If

anyone hears my voice and opens to me, I will come in to them and eat with them and they with me.” (Rev 3:20)

Samual spoke those words and God spoke to Samuel. God called Samuel to bring new light and deeper faith to the people of God. Change came about. Eli’s line of priesthood would come to an end with him — his sons would not carry on. Eli was gracious enough and faithful enough to know that this was right. It’s not easy to let go of the old, but God had new plans, and it was for the good of Israel. Samuel would become a great prophet and judge/ruler in Israel.

We often have people who watch our service who belong to other smaller churches. I want to encourage you that your job is to keep tending the lamp of God. It hasn’t gone out yet! I’m grateful for so many faithful churches and faithful people who keep that flickering lamp going. Remember, it’s not your job to bring renewal, it’s your job to be faithful. It’s *God’s job to bring renewal*. God will bring revival how and when God chooses. And those of us who have been faithfully tending the lamp of God may be asked to step aside or to give over our projects for someone or something new, for a new generation and a new way of serving God. May we be grace-filled in what we are called to do.

But always we are called to tend that lamp within us and outside of us. That is Spiritual Vibrancy. It is our job to say “Here I am, Lord, speak! For your servant is listening.” We do that in so many ways. We do that in quiet morning devotionals. We do that as we come to worship. We do that as we join a Bible study or Christian meditation, or as we serve a meal and are aware of God’s presence in the chaos of the kitchen. We do that as we bring awareness and just action to situations that are broken and need healing, and we do that when we are present to another when we tell someone they matter ... that we see the image of God in them.

There is nothing like having that living faith inside — inside you, inside this church.

It’s not about keeping things the way they’ve always been. It’s about entering into a living, changing, transforming relationship. A living faith gives us an anchor in times of change. A vibrant spirituality gives meaning and purpose to life and allows us to boldly make a difference beyond ourselves. Living and sharing a deep faith — “de profundus” — is the primary purpose for this church because God has called us. God is calling you. God is calling this church. My prayer is that like Samuel, you and this church will continue to hear God’s call and continue to say “Here I am. Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Or as the Sufi poet, Hafiz wrote:

Every Child Has known God, Not the God of names, Nor the God of don’ts, Nor the God who never does Anything weird, But the God who knows only four words And keeps repeating them, saying: “Come dance with Me.” “Come Dance”.