

Wall Street United Church, June 1st 2025

Samuel — and the need to change the church

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." 7 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." Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him." As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-Sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.

The Lamp Still Burns! Hearing God in a Flickering World

This is a hinge moment for the people of God. Or maybe a threshold moment, between old and new, old and young, sleeping and waking, dying and living. To set the scene, you've got young Samuel in the temple. He's been there since his mother dedicated him to the service of God and brought him there as soon as he was weaned. I don't know how old he is in this story, but I'm going to guess a young teen. He is learning how to do the day-to-day work of keeping the temple going, keeping the lamp of God lit.

Things are not all rosy and good. There are a couple of small lines at the beginning that tell us this: *"The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."* And later we hear about Eli the priest that his eyesight was growing dim and that *"the lamp of God had not yet gone out."* This speaks to a physical reality — the time of day and the time of life — but also to a spiritual condition that was afflicting Eli and the people of God. Fewer people were hearing God's voice clearly or seeing God's path clearly. The lamp of God was running out of fuel — it was flickering and there was a very real threat that it would be extinguished all together.

Proverbs 29:18 in the KJV reads *"Where there is no vision, the people perish."* No vision + no hope = despair, defeat, weariness and death.

Why were visions rare in those days? **A) Does God get tired** and go on vacation from time to time? It can certainly feel like that sometimes. Maybe it's **B) the fault of the religious leaders?** Were they not slaughtering the lambs the right way? Were their prayers half hearted? Were the meetings too long and divisive? Maybe they weren't keeping the wrong people out or perhaps they were keeping too many out — putting up obstacles and barriers. (Maybe they weren't doing enough turkey dinners and pie sales to raise enough money to keep the house of God ship-shape!)

Maybe it was **C) society's fault?** Maybe the people were enrolling their kids in hockey instead of Torah school and skipping synagogue too often. Maybe the people were distracted and worried.

I don't know. Except it's probably not **A**. Because we know that God never slumbers or sleeps, so I'm pretty sure vacations are out too! I don't think it's entirely **B – the church's fault**—because we don't make visions and dreams happen by our hard work or efforts. **Visions ultimately come as grace**, as a gift from God. And frankly the same is true of the **society**. Some more evangelical pastors might argue that society is in a state of sin ... which I don't disagree with! (Though we'd probably disagree on what we point out as sin. I'd be pointing to how we can allow people to live and die on the streets, I'd point out how we can sit back while Palestinian people are starved to death — not because there isn't enough food but because a country is using food and water as a weapon of war and because countries like ours support that country.) Certainly, there is sin in the world — disconnection from God and from how God calls us to live with each other and creation. But God doesn't wait for the world to be good and deserving to show up. The world was not especially good when Jesus was born. *For the world was so good that God sent his only son, that whoever believes ...* That's not how that verse goes, is it? *For God so loved the world...*

So why are visions of God sometimes rare? The honest answer is I don't know. I give this answer because I feel like we're living in a time where the visions feel rare. Churches are dying, people are disconnected and lonely. Mental health challenges are increasing. Wars feel unending. All the issues are resulting in more and more challenges and frictions and factions.

Back in a time different from ours (but also something like ours), young **Samuel and elder Eli are not having a good night's sleep**. They keep being interrupted. Hearing from God is so rare that young Samuel has no idea what he's hearing. [This is a good reminder that you need to learn how to hear God's voice, there is training involved.] He hears God call his name and he doesn't recognize the voice. He goes to ask the elder Eli, but Eli is half asleep and not tuned in to God at this point either. So twice Eli sends him back to bed. In the fog of that place, between waking and sleeping, Eli has a thought ... *maybe it's God calling the boy?* and so the next time around he tells Samuel to answer the voice: *"Speak, for your servant is listening."*

Samuel trusts his elder and does what he's told, and God does indeed speak and then keeps on speaking to and through Samuel all through Samuel's life. What incredible news! At just the right time, in the nick of time, in the fullness of time, the Word of God is heard, and visions are seen. The lamp of God goes from flickering to full flames.

Next Sunday is Pentecost Sunday, the day we celebrate the time when the Holy Spirit fell on the church. On that occasion Peter quotes the prophet Joel at the time of Pentecost: **"In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."** Acts 2:17 Instead of *'the word of God was not heard and visions were rare in those days,'* you get a picture of a strong connection to God, of fullness of life ... life full of beauty and meaning and hope and creativity. Visions and dreams speak to life and an unbroken, life-giving connection to God, to people, to creation.

But there's a catch! It's not all good news. Well, it is good news, but it doesn't entirely feel like it. Visions and prophecies from God are always good and always lead to life — but they disrupt and lead to change.

Interesting that Eli trusts the voice even more than Samuel at first! He insists on hearing the message and seems to have an inkling that it might be something he doesn't want to hear.

And he's right. God told Samuel that Eli's line of priests will not continue. That his sons who have been corrupt, who have cheated people, cheated God and disrespected people and the house of God will *not* continue to serve God. Their time is done. There will be justice.

Remember I said this was a hinge story or a threshold story. In order for God's life and spirit to emerge fresh, some of what is old has to die. I think we are at a hinge or threshold time in this church and congregation. Going through our Strategic Plan helped us as a congregation to see that we are called by God to reach out Beyond the Walls. In 2 1/2 years we will celebrate our 200th anniversary as a church! This month the United Church of Canada is celebrating 100 years.

One of the questions I want to ask is: *Do you want this church to be a place where your children and grandchildren can find meaning and purpose? Do you want this church to be a mission, a church that offers life to a weary world?*

Young people are desperate for meaning, purpose and belonging. They are not atheists ... they are looking to astrology and all sorts of ways to understand the world. I read an interesting article about men getting into what the writer termed “*conspirituality*” which is a melding of conspiracy theories mixed with faith and spirituality. “Conspirituality” goes a long way to help understand the Q-Anon following and how Donald Trump got elected again. But part of what people are looking for is meaning, purpose and security in a turbulent world. They are finding it sometimes in strange or dangerous places.

I’ve said this numerous times, but we have something here — **we have a treasure** that is the gospel of Jesus. People and churches where the lamp of God burns brightly, where visions and dreams are seen and received – these people, these churches change lives and heal communities and even bring life and healing to the world. But they can’t get it easily the way we have wrapped it up. We need to make changes so that the gospel of Jesus can continue to be heard, so that there is more life, healing and justice and not death, hurt and injustice and inhumanity. What kind of changes? We are still discerning that. The vision for the change in **Heritage Hall** is a good example. That hall has become a museum piece for our congregation. And I love it. I studied history. And there is so much in there that is recent history. I’ve been part of this congregation, (with a few gap years) for 37 years. I remember when many of those pictures went up. I know or knew 9 of the ministers on the Wall of Fame (that’s what I call it — the line of minister’s pictures who have served here at Wall Street. My father is one of them.) I love all this stuff. And I’m aware that when new people come to the space it feels like an old, dusty museum ... a place that *used to* be relevant. A place where cool things used to happen. History is wonderful. Museums are wonderful. But the church is not meant to be a museum. We are called to tend the lamp of God here and now, for this generation! It’s not just the building that needs to change. In some ways, the Heritage Hall becoming Great Waters Hall or another name, is a symbol or a beating heart to the change we need to seek out.

We need to learn to communicate better with an online audience. We're pretty good. But most people are receiving information in 30 seconds to a minute sound-bites — so a 20-minute sermon (if you're lucky!), hymns and long announcements on a hard pew doesn't connect. So perhaps it's using AI to cut good content from what we are already doing. Perhaps it's leaning into offering some forms of worship that are more experiential — making space for people to hear God calling their name.

The message does not change, but how we reach others with that message always needs to shift to be relevant. Jim Collins, who wrote *'Good to Great'*, used to talk about **preserving the core and stimulating progress**. If you want to grow and thrive you need to do both. Hold onto that core of who we are — reaching out with the transforming love of God — while stimulating progress and innovation. Letting the old, that is not part of the core, go — and being willing to say **yes** to what is new.

Reluctantly Samuel shares the words of God with Eli — the word that things are going to change — and what does Eli do? He doesn't fight or argue or even get defensive. Instead, Eli accepts. I'm sure he didn't like it but he accepts it, and even calls it good. *"It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."* God still speaks.

I long for a time when others catch the spark — the fire of a relationship with God, a transforming relationship with Jesus. Nothing is like it. We can't make revival happen, but we can be ready for it. We can be faithful, tending the lamp (cleaning the brass, reading the scriptures), we can be humble and recognize where we are stuck and think our way is the right way, the best way, and we can be willing to answer "Speak Lord! For your servant is listening!" We can be ready to mentor others who are younger and to step back and say "It is the Lord, let him do what seems good." God is still speaking. God is still calling for justice, healing and love. Because God is good all the time, and all the time, God is good.