

Samuel; Priest and Prophet



1 Samuel 8:20 "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."

Prior to the second half of the 20th century, the Lectionaries of the Western liturgical Churches usually had a one year set of Scripture passages assigned to each Sunday and Holy Day, so that you heard the exact same Readings on the First Sunday of Advent, for instance, year after year. There were so few Scripture Readings then that they could conveniently be

printed in the Books of Common Prayer. But that also meant that the average parishioner didn't hear much of the Bible at church during their lifetime, just a few chosen selections, and different denominations often had different readings for the same Sunday or Holy Day.

A new Lectionary was developed by the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II which provided for a three-year cycle of Sunday readings, as an attempt to engage parishioners more deeply in the Scriptures. The then new 1979 Episcopal Book of Common Prayer adopted this lectionary as did many other denominations. This now so-called Common Lectionary was an ecumenical project that developed out of a concern for the unity of the church and a desire for a common experience of Scripture, so that on any given Sunday, Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others all heard the same Readings in an expanded three-year cycle.

With this Common Lectionary, congregations heard most of the Gospel of Matthew in Year A, Mark in Year B, and Luke in Year C, with a good portion of the Gospel of John spread through all three years. The other books of the New Testament were usually read in continuous passages to capture a more complete sense of each book or epistle. You might notice that we are currently working our way through the Second Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians week after week, and in the middle of July we

will start working our way through the next of Paul's letters, this one to the Ephesians. However, the Old Testament Reading in the Common Lectionary was just a passage chosen to accent the Gospel Reading of the day, and varied greatly from week to week.

This led some critics to complain that the great stories of the Old Testament were not being properly told. So, in 1992, a Revised Common Lectionary was proposed that afforded a continuous reading of the Old Testament stories for the long stretch from the first Sunday after Trinity in the spring right up to the First Sunday of Advent in late November or early December, what the Roman Church calls 'ordinary time,' and Anglicans usually call the long Season After Pentecost. So, in year A, you now hear the stories of the Patriarchs; of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and then Joseph, then Moses and the Exodus, and Joshua and the conquest of the Promised Land. In year B, which we are in now, you will hear the stories of the rise of the Monarchy in Israel with the tales of Samuel, then Saul, then David, then Solomon, and then pieces of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. And in year C, you hear from the writings of the Prophets from Elijah to Malachi.

So today marks the beginning of our continuous Old Testament readings for Year B, which are about the rise of the monarchy in Israel, a monarchy that climaxed with Good King David and Wise King Solomon, when the Holy Land was finally at

peace, and had extended to its boundaries to its furthest point, enjoyed such wealth and fame that even the famed Queen of Sheba came to visit. So to set the historical stage as we begin this series, note that the twelve tribes of Israel, derived from the twelve sons of the Patriarch Jacob, are now settled in Palestine after the long Exodus with Moses in the wilderness, and the period of Conquest of that Promised Land under Joshua, a land flowing with milk and honey, which the twelve tribes had divided amongst themselves, and were thus living as individual tribes throughout the countryside, living almost like strangers to one and another. Sometimes, one of the neighboring peoples would intrude into their peaceful existence, neighbors like the Moabites, the Edomites, or the Midianites. On those occasions, the individual tribes of Israel so affected would call out to the Lord their God for help, and the Lord would raise up a mighty military hero to defend and protect them, heroes like Gideon or Samson or Deborah. This was the so-called period of the "judges," the biblical name for those local heroes.

But now a most formidable foe has arisen in the West, the Philistines, for they were more powerful than any one or two or three tribes of Israel. For the Philistines had weapons of bronze and with them threatened the very existence of Israel. When in three weeks' time we get to the story of David and Goliath, a Philistine, note that Goliath had a bronze shield and

a bronze spear, while the Israelites were still living in the Stone Age! And in those days, we are told again and again, there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

However, in order to beat the Philistines and preserve their inheritance, the tribes of Israel would need to join together. So, next week, all the elders of Israel will gather and come to Samuel at Ramah, and say to him, "You are old (now) and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations, someone who could unite the 12 tribes, and govern them, and lead them out to battle, like the judges had before them, but all together this time. So how do you start a monarchy? Usually, some great military leader defends his country in battle or expands their territory and then shares the spoils of war with his people, who thus rally around him and hail him as their king, and whose son would rule thereafter him. But that's not how it happened to the tribes of Israel. The Jewish people have God on their side, and so they looked to God for direction. A holy man of God will be needed to anoint their king, and for the Israelites, that holy man will be Samuel, the prophet and priest of Shiloh, where the Ark of the Covenant resided.

And today's reading sets that stage. You may remember the earlier story of Hannah, the childless wife of one Elkanah,

whose other wife teased and criticized Hannah for her barrenness. So, Hannah went to the ancient Temple of Shiloh to pray for a child. The priest there was named Eli, and he found Hannah in the temple praying silently, but with her lips moving. Eli thought that Hannah was intoxicated, but after Hannah's explanation of her sobriety, Eli told her, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have requested." Hannah went home filled with hope. Subsequently, Hannah became pregnant; and named her child Samuel, which means God has sent him. Hannah then sang a song that is reminiscent of the Magnificat and dedicated her son to God.

In today's reading, Samuel is a young boy, studying under the now old and virtually blind priest Eli. The Lord God called to the boy Samuel as he was lying in the temple one night, but Samuel didn't recognize his voice and woke up old Eli to ask what he wanted, thinking it was his voice that he heard. Eli told him that he didn't call, and to go back to bed. Three times this happened, and in the end, it was old Eli who realized that it was the Lord God who was calling Samuel, and he instructed 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 God revealed to Samuel that he was going to strike down the house of Eli because his sons were blaspheming, and Eli could not restrain them. In the morning, Eli asked young Samuel what was it that God told him. Samuel was afraid to share the vision with Eli, who said, "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 the priest Eli said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

So, the Philistines mustered for war against Israel, and Eli's two sons were killed in the first battle and the Ark of the Covenant of God at Shiloh was captured. And when Eli heard that the Ark was captured, he fell over backward and broke his neck and died. So, Samuel succeeded Eli as the priest of Shiloh, and it is to him that the elders of Israel will turn to as the threat of the Philistine armies becomes real. And that is where the story continues next week! Amen.