

Good morning!

For those of you who read my Hilltop newsletter article this month, what I am about to say might be a little redundant, and I apologize.

But I am going to discuss it this morning because I think it is important for us to all be on the same page about what I am going to be preaching about over the course of the next few Sundays.

So, my sermon series for the next four Sundays is called “Four Stories of Faith.”

I have noticed in “these times,” which you can define as you see fit, that people seem to be faith-weary.

We are trying to do the right thing, trying to stay optimistic, trying to stay connected to others, trying to be beacons of love and kindness, and yet, a lot of us are still to weary.

We are tired.

Many of us are seeing a new version of our nation that we don't recognize.

We see people in power treating vulnerable people in ways that we just can't condone.

We see loved ones fighting, backing further and further into their corners, the schism getting wider with each breaking news story.

Many of us feel powerless and faithless, wondering, where in the world is God in all of this, because it doesn't feel like God is spending much time in the United States right now.

And so.

I decided to preach 4 sermons about people in the Bible who dug deep and found their faith and their courage even when things looked bleak.

And, while I don't like to rank levels of suffering, I will say that their problems were *worse* than ours.

They were living in even more perilous times, with more dangerous governments, and more corruption, and less freedom.

And their lives were at greater risk and the relationships between nations were tense at best and they were at war more often than they weren't.

So, if these biblical characters of all ages, backgrounds and genders were able to maintain their faith in God in the midst of their circumstances, then surely we can keep the faith in the midst of ours.

Today we are going to hopefully glean some wisdom from a young child name Samuel.

Historians think that he's about 11 years old in this story.

Samuel was a faithful child because he was able to rely on God, telling the hard truth to a man named Eli.

We will hear more about what he said and did in a minute, but it's important that we know a little bit about the man in this story, named Eli, who interacts with Samuel.

So who was Eli?

Eli was extremely powerful because he was a high priest, and he was a judge.

He led the people of Israel for 40 years, starting about 3,000 years ago.

Eli was a well-respected leader and elder, however, he had two sons who were not so well respected.

His sons were named Hophni and Phineas and they sinned against God.

They ate the best cuts of meat from the animals that were sacrificed at the temple, and they pursued the women who worked at the sanctuary.

I hope that you adults know what I mean when I say that the two brothers "pursued the women."

Even though it's Eli's sons who are so sinful, God takes issue with Eli, because of how he handles the situation.

God doesn't think Eli punishes his sons enough.

He lightly rebukes them, and ultimately, he doesn't stop their terrible behavior.

So God is upset with the Israeli leader Eli, but what does this have to do with Samuel?

Well, Samuel, remember, the 11-year-old boy, he is tasked with telling Eli how mad God is at him.

Samuel has lived at the temple, since birth, with Eli, and he was raised by him.

Eli is basically like a father to him.

The story we heard this morning is Samuel's famous "call" story.

He grows up to be a prophet, and every prophet has a 'call' experience in which they receive the divine word of God, or they learn that they are called to be prophets in their time.

So in this story, God called Samuel 3 different times in the middle of the night, and each time, he thinks it's the elderly Eli beckoning for him in the other room.

So Samuel gets up, goes to Eli, and Eli tells him to go back to bed because he didn't call him.

Finally, Eli realizes what is happening, and like any good mentor, Eli gives Samuel instructions.

He says, go back to bed, but if you hear someone calling you again, say, "Speak for your servant is listening."

God does call him again, and this time, this is how Samuel responds.

So God tells him that God is going to punish Eli and his family forever because his sons were unfaithful and Eli didn't do enough to stop their behavior.

Samuel then goes back to bed and rises the next morning, as usual.

But Eli knows that God spoke to him, and so Eli wants to know what God said.

Now, Samuel is in the very difficult situation of having to tell his wise, old, powerful, well-respected father figure and mentor that God is going to punish him and his family forever because of the sins of his sons.

This punishment means that all the male descendants will die before reaching old age and they'll be put in lesser positions than leaders from other families.

Now, we know in the Bible that prophets are often treated terribly.

They are ignored, killed, tortured, maligned, ostracized, etc.

Samuel is totally dependent on Eli for his health, his safety and his overall well-being.

He's 11 years old, he can't fend for himself.

So, I could see a situation in which Samuel might want to lie about what God told him.

Or maybe at least bend or stretch the truth, so as not to upset Eli.

He doesn't want Eli to take out his rage and anger on him, punishing him simply for being God's messenger.

But Samuel puts all his trust in God, forgoing his own agency for God's agency and he chooses to tell Eli the whole truth, regardless of what the consequences might be.

Well, it turns out that Eli is open to hearing what Samuel says, and he doesn't punish Samuel.

He simply said, *'It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.'*" (1 Samuel 3: 18)

This experience set the tone for the rest of Samuel's prophetic career.

The Bible says that as he grew up, the Lord with him and let none of his words fall to the ground, which means that Samuel faithfully communicated what God said to him, without omitting, editing, revising or otherwise changing God's message.

The reason I decided to highlight Samuel's story today is because he was not only a person of deep faith, but he was a young boy as well.

I think we often associate faith and wisdom with age, somehow assuming that faith is a linear trajectory and the older we are, the more faithful we become.

But Samuel took this risk, and placed all his trust in God at 11 years old.

It took him a minute, and he did need help from Eli, but he also had the ears to hear God, which is what I think many of us often lack.

We aren't willing to hear God, maybe because we are afraid of the message we will receive.

As one pastor said, *“These days, if I hear a voice in the night... I will question my sanity. Or cut back on caffeine. Or sign up for yoga. I'll probably do everything but believe that God is talking to me.”* (Thomas, Debie. ‘The Outsider Prophet,’ www.journeywithjesus.com.)

That’s what we do though, right, when we are hearing some kind of message that could be from the divine, we rationalize it away.

Or we ignore it so that we don’t have to respond to it.

Now, the story we heard this morning has this funny line that I want us to take note of.

It happens when God is speaking to Samuel.

God says, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.” (1 Samuel 3: 11).

God is going to make people’s ears tingle.

I never ceased to be amazed by the creativity of the biblical authors.

Tingling ears, who would’ve imagined?

But I digress.

My point is that we, too, need to have ears that are able to tingle when we know God is speaking to us, nudging us, prodding us to do something.

We have to be wise enough to discern when it's God, humble enough to listen and courageous enough to follow God's call for us.

Beloved ones, I know that you might be feeling weary, and you might feel like God has left the building, and you might be feeling powerless and despondent, like there's nothing you can do to make a difference.

But there is.

You can keep your faith.

Nobody can take that from you.

And when God calls and you feel moved to act, but you're kind of scared or worried or anxious, lean into that faith with all your might.

Because that faith, that commitment to God, will give you the courage to say, "Here I am, send me."

Amen.