

Pastor Roy's Sermon from March 26, 2017 (Lent 4)

Throughout history, the faithful, have seen with eyes of faith rather than impulse and instinct. We can all ask the question, how can I learn to see and live with eyes of faith?

Samuel has eyes of faith. How did Samuel learn to see what was not? How did he learn to look for the unlikely, even the impossible? The story of Samuel is a story of unlikely events. Samuel's mother was not likely to have a child despite her longing for a child. The story of Samuel does not tell us that those women with faith have children. Instead it reminds us that faith is about living the unexpected. It is to do the unnatural. To make decisions that run counter to even common sense. To follow the good voice of God that calls us to see clearly in the dark, to follow the path that can't possibly ever succeed. Samuel's mother prays with release and abandon at the temple. Eli thinks she has been drinking and reprimands her. Then he realizes she is praying. He is surprised. Eli tells her, "Go in peace. The God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." She does exactly that. She is filled with peace and hope. Again, this story is not about a successful prayer for a child. This is about a woman who trusted God, no matter what. How do we know that? Because when Samuel is born, after he is weaned, she gives him away. She takes him back to Eli for Eli to raise as prophet and priest. I'm pretty sure nobody but Hannah in that area did that. They might give their 7th or 8th son to the priest to raise, after they had more than plenty of children. But never the first born. The first born is the son of inheritance. In their culture, the first born son is the salvation of the mother. In our culture, this reality seems to diminish the value of women in general. But in their society and culture, that's just the way it was. The men had the power, and so if a woman gave birth to a son, she had value. It hurts to even say that today. But that was Hannah's painful world. But the foundation of her faith is that she rejected that judgment. Her world judged her as worthless, but she saw what could not be seen. She saw the possibility that her son would be of value not just to her sense of value, but would bring faith to Israel. She looked for the impossible. And that is what she got. If you read the Songful prayer of Hannah in I Samuel 2, it is full of impossible things. Things that should not be, but are because of faith. Read it and see. I Samuel is the 9th book of the Bible. Chapter 2.

Hannah's faith is even more unlikely because Eli miserably failed to train his sons to be faithful priests. They were self-centered and cared mainly for their own desires and wishes. Back to Samuel. But Hannah's faith sees what could be, not what is. She gives her son to be raised by priest with a bad track record. How *does* Samuel learn to see with eyes of faith? While still a child Samuel learns to listen to God.

It's always been one of my favorite passages in the Hebrew Bible. "Samuel, Samuel." 3 times he hears. 3 times he runs to Eli his priestly father. On the 3rd time, Eli helps Samuel listen to God. In stories, 3 is a charm. It takes three times for Samuel and Eli to figure out how to listen to God.

Samuel cuts his teeth on bad news for Eli. Despite his inability to teach his sons the faith, he teaches Samuel the faith. It's as if Samuel is his grandson. He has learned a few things the hard way and now succeeds. When he asks Samuel, Samuel is afraid. Eli says, "Whatever you heard last night, tell me now. When you have a message from God, you must share it. You cannot keep it to yourself. Samuel gives him the bad news. In time, Eli and his sons die and the priesthood at Shiloh continues with a non - levite—Samuel.

Samuel's first choice of a king, Saul fails. He seemed like he should be a fine king. But he wasn't. He didn't see the impossible from God—the path of faithfulness despite the odds. He was practical. And in the end he ignored the ways of God for the ways which work but cut against the grain of the Spirit of God. (I Samuel 2—the weak become strong and the strong lose their strength.)

Even when Samuel has the right family, he has to listen carefully to hear the Spirit tell him to choose the invisible son. (Surely you have yet another son, somewhere??) Ahh, this is the one! The least likely to succeed. Nobody's choice but God's. And David is celebrated as the mightiest, finest king in the history of Israel. Even Jesus is. . .son of David.

Faith sees the impossible, the unlikely, as the best course of action. Faith which comes from years of practice listening to the Spirit. It's not magic, its prayerful practice. The kind of prayer which comes of struggling to know what to do based on love, mercy, peace, kindness, justice, and other impossible, unlikely things.

Jesus heals the unlikely blind man. He and the blind man see what cannot be seen. All the people that should know better, don't and can't because they are not looking with eyes of faith. They use eyes of habit and fear and mistrust.

To what is God calling you and us? What impossible, unlikely things is the Spirit calling us to see and do.

Courage to us all. Amen.