

The Lamp of God

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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I Samuel 3:1-10, 19-21

As we continue in worship tonight, exploring the theme of the Lamp of God, God's revelation in the world, we turn now towards a time in the history of God's people when God's revelation was scarce. There was no Bible like we have today, the birth of Christ was far away, and God's people were not in a season of God's active revelation. As New Testament Christians, we don't know much about that experience - we have the Bible, God's word of revelation, we have our brother Jesus, the image of the invisible God, and we have the Holy Spirit, the illuminator of God's revelation. However, we do have seasons in our church year when we experience a similar darkness and absence of God's revelation.

Advent situates us in a season of anticipating the birth of Jesus, we wait in darkness for the light of Christ to arrive. During Holy Week, we observe Maundy Thursday in which we lose the Christ candle from the sanctuary - the symbolic light of Christ is extinguished as we remember the death of Jesus. The Easter vigil, observed by many Anglican churches, dwells in darkness, mourning the absence of God in the world.

Thankfully, we also participate in church seasons that celebrate the revelation of God in the world, the light of Christ among us. Epiphany is the season following Advent and Christmas, in which we celebrate the proclamation of God's revelation in Christ and we bring the good news of Emmanuel, God-with-us, into the world. And Easter Sunday, in fact, all of Eastertide, we celebrate the return of the light of Christ in Jesus's resurrection. The darkness will never overcome the light.

But let's return now to a time in the history of God's people, when God was not fully revealed in Jesus, and when the world was spiritually dark. In our story we learn that Samuel is in both spiritual darkness and actual darkness. The word of the Lord was rare in the days of Samuel, and Samuel did not yet know the Lord. So we enter into Samuel's and Israel's story in a dark time; a time of chaos.

Israel is living as a collection of tribes, ruled by various judges; not yet a unified kingdom with one king. Remember the history of Israel so far: God rescued them from slavery and established a covenant with them, they entered the promised land but failed to live as God's faithful people. Our story is situated in this chaotic time and Israel is in need of wise and faithful leaders.

Here is where we find the boy Samuel, around 12 years old, serving in the temple with Eli. Eli was a priest of Shiloh and the second-to-last Israelite judge before the rule of the Kings of Israel and Judah. Eli doesn't have a great track record as a priest and judge. In the beginning of 1 Samuel, Eli encounters Hannah, who will become the mother of Samuel, in the temple praying for a child, and Eli accuses her of being drunk while she prays. That doesn't scream pastoral to me. Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas, were terrible priests as well - giving little regard to God or their duties. In 1 Samuel chapter 2, Eli confronts his sons but they don't respond. So the priesthood of Eli will end with him; the house of Eli no longer has favor with God.

So Samuel's story is situated in a time of spiritual darkness, but also actual darkness - as it is not yet dawn. The lamp of God had not yet gone out. Now this lamp is a real lamp in the sanctuary of the temple that burns through the night until morning. So since the lamp had not yet gone out, we know that morning has not arrived. It's still dark outside.

But tonight, as we've considered the lamp of God as the revelation of God, the mention of this lamp in our story is curious...it certainly helps to situate the story in time - it's night, but perhaps it helps foreshadow more than the coming light of dawn. The lamp of God had not yet gone out - could it be that Samuel will play a part in making the lamp light shine bright once again? It is also curious that Eli's blurry vision is mentioned - I've heard this is a symptom of aging, but perhaps more than that, Eli's blurry vision is a symbol of his inability to

see God - visions were not common; the word of the Lord was rare. Is the revelation of God coming for Samuel?

Although as the Church of Christ, we have the revelation of God in the word and in Jesus Christ, we don't have to look far to also notice spiritual darkness all around us. Sometimes it's dark in our world, our country, our city, our neighborhood, our church, our homes, even in our own spirits. We may feel like the Israelites or Samuel. The word of the Lord seems rare, visions of light and life are not widespread. In our world, we want leaders to follow who are looking out for our good. We want the lamp of God to be bright.

In church history, we live after the time of Christ, we have the revelation of God through the word and through Jesus, all illuminated by the Holy Spirit. In the church year, it's not advent, with its darkness and shadows and longings for the coming light of Christ. And it's not Holy Week, when we exist in the church without the light of Christ. But it sure can seem dark.

Nearly 10 years ago in 2015, Amena Brown, a spoken word poet, wrote a piece called "Advent for Weary Souls." What I love about this poem is the way she gives words to the timeless sense of spiritual darkness we experience in a broken world. I want to read selected portions of her poem to you: This year has brought us tears and sorrow/Watching our world, like the very ground beneath us tremble with fear racism death hate/So many questions without answers/So many mothers who have had to bury their children/We cannot unplug from the noise of news/Our world is being torn at its seams by the tug of war/Finding it difficult to make or keep peace/The fight for human rights/The fear of disease/The violence of militants, lives are being snuffed and stolen/Typhoons, airstrikes, open fire/Our cities and towns are at an unrest/As we wrestle with the violence of lone gunmen, immigration, race relations/As we watch our neighborhoods turn into war zones, we don't hear the wounds/We just take sides and divide to find our "us" so we can accuse "them"/We have stopped listening/We find ourselves with angry fists in what is supposed to be the season of giving/There have been breaches in our confidence and trust/We have lost our ability to mourn with those who mourn/To see injustice with disgust

Those feelings you notice when you hear this poem – maybe despair, anger, sadness, longing - hold those in your heart as we return to our text. In our story we find Samuel laying down in the temple, near the ark of God and Eli is laying someplace else. All of a sudden, Samuel is stirred by the voice of the Lord calling to him. Samuel responds by calling out to Eli, "Here I am," before he goes to where Eli's is, perhaps stumbling around corners and down hallways in the dark. Finding Eli, he says "I'm here, you called me." But Eli did not call Samuel so he sent him back to his place to lay down.

After finally settling down, perhaps calming his rapidly beating heart after jumping awake upon hearing his name called, Samuel hears the call from the Lord again. He gets up, maybe more aware of his surroundings than last time, and walks to Eli's place. He finds Eli and once more he learns that Eli didn't call him. Maybe Samuel's walk back to bed looked kind of like that defeated Charlie Brown walk...shoulders slumped over. You know the one.

But Samuel's return to Eli, twice now, expecting he was the one calling, makes sense since we know that Samuel spent the majority of his young life ministering before the Lord under Eli. Perhaps that is why we find a clarification in verse 7, immediately after the second call of the Lord to Samuel which he thinks is from Eli. Scripture says, "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord. The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." Maybe this is a clue that helps explain the confusion so far. Between Eli's blurry vision and Samuel's young spirit, neither of them has a clear sense from where this call is coming.

In what we might identify as the persistence of God, God calls once more to Samuel. At this point, Samuel probably isn't asleep anymore and he certainly knows the drill. He gets up, marches to Eli and says, "Here I am, for you called me." It is now, at this third call that Eli perceives correctly - the call is from the Lord. He offers Samuel simple, yet profound instructions: "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

Samuel does just that - he returns to his place in the temple near the ark of God once more. Then, the Lord calls again as before, but this time the Lord came and stood there. Can you imagine the surprise and extravagance of

this call?! Samuel has heard the same call three times before: "Samuel," and it was pretty low-key; but this time...he heard and he saw! He heard the call of the Lord because he was listening.

And this time Samuel has a response prepared: "Speak, for your servant is listening." His response is what scholars call a formula of differential response to superior authority - which is just a fancy way of saying that this phrase was commonly used by people responding to an authority. Samuel finally knew to whom he was responding.

At this moment, I am curious about the darkness and the light. Perhaps the temple is brighter because dawn is closer than it was when Samuel first heard the call. The lamp of God in the temple has certainly grown more dim as the night is farther away. However, the lamp of God which is God's revelation to the world, has just grown a little brighter. Scripture says: The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And Samuel's word came to all Israel.

By this call in the night, God made known what was previously hidden to Samuel and Israel, and the chaotic life of the tribes of Israel began to shift. Samuel helps the tribes unite into one kingdom and helps guide the monarchy through the rule of Saul to David. Samuel was a key figure in keeping the Israelites' religious heritage and identity alive during Israel's defeat and occupation by the Philistines. Samuel gained national prominence as a prophet and led the Israelites against the Philistines which ushered in a long period of peace for the Israelites.

Church of Christ, we are living after a different moment when God made known what was previously hidden - a revelation far greater than what Samuel and the Israelites lived after. The words from the Gospel according to John chapter 1 tell the story: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning...What has come into being in him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. That word, 'overcome' is a weak translation of the Greek word, *katalambano*. More strongly it means that the darkness cannot seize the light. The darkness cannot possess or catch the light. The darkness cannot even comprehend the light. Perhaps that is the glory of the lamp of God in our story tonight - as the lamp of God that lit the temple through the night burned out, the lamp of God that is the revelation of God was burning brighter. The light of Christ is brighter than any spiritual darkness the world can throw at us.

Returning to John chapter 1: The Word became flesh and lived among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the father, full of grace and truth...No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

Beloved, the Lamp of God has not gone out.

Not only has it not gone out, we carry it through the presence of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps like Samuel, our mission now is to bring the Lamp of God, the revelation of God, to our community. When Samuel finally understood from whom his call came, he lived a prophetic life, bringing the word of God and the peace of God to all of Israel.

My friend Thelma carries the light of Christ which breaks into spiritual darkness while she works as the Executive Director of Dégagé Ministries. Thelma tells a story about watching a woman wandering around our neighborhood outside Dégagé for over a year. This nameless woman never really looked around, never really stood up straight, never used shelter, and never spoke. Thelma and other Dégagé staff greeted her with kindness, informed her of available services, and invited her into the respite of shelter. Finally, this nameless woman began using shelter. She came into Dégagé for mealtimes, for laundry, for showers, she even said her name, but remained silent. Nearly another whole year passed as other Dégagé patrons and staff demonstrated

the welcoming love of the God. Then about seven months ago, this formerly nameless, silent, scared woman, began telling her story to Thelma and the Dégagé staff.

Beloved, we all have heard the call of God to bring the Lamp of God's revelation into the darkness of the world. We don't do this by dismissing the darkness and desperately hoping for something better. We do this with confidence in the promises of God, found in the revelation of God by his word and in the person of Jesus Christ. For we have all been the people walking in darkness, and we are all the people who have seen a great light. Our world, our country, our city, our church, our neighborhood, our homes...the word of the Lord may seem rare and visions of life and light uncommon, but the Lamp of God has not yet gone out.

Family of God, we know God through Jesus Christ; Jesus, the light of the world. The image of the invisible God. And God calls each of us to personal knowledge of God - one of the proclamations of Epiphany is just that, to celebrate the indwelling of the light of Christ, and it's what Paul speaks for all of us in Philippians 3: I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

And the promise of God is this: Someday, we will live after one final experience of God making known what was previously hidden - the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. Imagine this city: "I saw no temple in the city," says John, "for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of the Lord is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. See, I am coming soon."

And so dear ones, with the revelation of God in and among us, and with the promises of God, we go out into the world with a song in our hearts, for the Lamp of God has not yet gone out. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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