

Message from Rev. Dr. Ian McPhee: Folks, I have uploaded the service that I taped from West Flamboro this afternoon, Saturday January 16, 2021. Because Rachel was unable to join me for health reasons I had no music for the service. So I decided to record it from the room where we often have meetings (not sure what you call it) Hopefully the sound is clearer for you to follow the service. Blessings on all of you. Ian.

The links are:

<https://www.facebook.com/WestFlamChurch/>

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCneF9IOARvh5R30Fzm-1ySA?view\\_as=subscriber](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCneF9IOARvh5R30Fzm-1ySA?view_as=subscriber)

***Making Way for the New***  
***1 Samuel 3:1-18***  
***January 17, 2021***

I was having all kinds of funny dreams the other night. I don't remember the details, but the overall impression was one of discomfort and tension. In a number of different pictures I saw a struggle between the old guard and the new kids on the block. My tension resulted from trying to keep them from fighting one another. These were not pleasant dreams, but often God does speak to us through our dreams. So I take them seriously. In one of these episodes there was a bunch of younger folks trying to snatch the huge chocolate squares out of the big container and on the other side there were a bunch of older folks trying to keep them from getting them. I have no idea what these squares represented, but they looked yummy and they were at least two feet square. I can't remember who won the contest, but I know I was sweating over the attempt to keep things calm. Well so much for bad dreams. Like old Scrooge perhaps I can write them off to a piece of bad cheese, but I suspect these dreams were telling me something about my struggles with the sermon this week.

After all the story of Eli and the boy Samuel is really about the passing of the old and the arrival of the new. Eli represents the old order. His priesthood has slowly disintegrated. The story gives us all sorts of clues to this fact. God's word is a rarity; his eyesight is dim so

he can't see very well; and his sons have been out of control as the previous chapter tells us. Eli sleeps in the shadows.

Eli's age isn't the reason for this. The reasons are evident in the previous chapters of the story. His spiritual integrity has been affected by his sons who have been allowed to get out of control. They are described as scoundrels. They have no compunction about stealing the best of the meat offerings brought by the people to the temple in worship. In addition, Eli's lack of spiritual sensitivity is well illustrated in the opening story of this book where he interprets Hannah's desperate prayer as drunkenness. He still performs his function as priest, but it feels like he is only going through the motions. No, it's not because Eli has gotten old, but rather because his spiritual vitality has diminished. This, I think, is what the symbols of shadow and dimness are telling us.

Samuel, on the other hand, is a young boy. He is an innocent who has lived in the temple from the time he left his mother who dedicated him to God. Samuel is everything that Eli is not. Open, young, dedicated, sensitive and eager to please. He represents the energy and youth of a new day dawning in Israel. And the story confirms this. Samuel is called by God three times, but, because he has not yet heard God's voice, misinterprets this to be Eli's call. When he finally hears God's voice, he is deeply troubled by the message. It is a message of judgment on Eli's priesthood, signaling the end of an era and the beginning of a new one under Samuel. The message God gives Samuel is so shocking that it will 'tingle people's ears'. Eli's failure to restrain his sons is the foundation of this terrible judgment. Naturally Samuel is reluctant to pass on such a gloomy message to the old priest. But give Eli credit for he demands to know the message and acquiesces in God's will.

Two things you have to admire about Eli. First, he yields to the will of God, even when it means the end of his family as priests before God. Second, you cannot underestimate his willingness to point Samuel in the right direction. Eli may have become insensitive and dim of sight, but he is still alive enough spiritually that he recognizes that it is God calling the young boy. Perhaps the note that the lamp of God hadn't yet gone out is symbolic of this fact. After the third time Eli recognizes that it is the Lord calling Samuel and directs Samuel on what to do

when he heard the voice again, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.'

What does this little tidbit tell us? Eli's willingness and openness to direct young Samuel to God is instructive of what we ought to be doing for the younger generation. We ought to be mentoring them. We ought to be directing them so that they can discern God's will for them. Often the adults in church fail to fulfill this role as mentors to the young. And I don't just mean in teaching situations. Just because we are not teaching Sunday school, or the youth group, or working officially with the young, doesn't mean we cannot mentor. Our prayers, our encouragement, our support, our willingness to direct and get close to our youth are some of the ways we can mentor youth.

I think of these young lives growing up in front of us who will be coming under enormous peer pressure to conform to the world's agenda. How can we help to shape their young lives so that their faith will be strong enough to meet these huge temptations? How can we mentor them? What do our churches need to do to create space for the next generation of young Christians? How do we make space for them? Does what we are doing in our churches' worship and education fit with the world these young folks have grown up in? Does anything need to change in how we operate?

I remember as a young, teenage Christian receiving spiritual direction and wonderful encouragement from different men and women in the church. People like Grant Cooke, a youthful fifty-year-old, who never ceased to encourage me in spiritual things, was one mentor I fondly remember. His spiritual passion inspired my teenage life. I can think of so many like Grant who helped me on the journey. Those who influenced me most were not necessarily ministers, but were often lay people who took their faith seriously. But we adults need to be spiritually alive ourselves in order to do this. Even old Eli, in spite of his dimness still had enough spiritual insight to give Samuel the most important lesson of his young life.

Jack Nicholson played Warren Schmidt in a 2002 movie that captured widespread attention and high praise from critics. In the film, ***About Schmidt***, Nicholson plays a 66-year-old insurance actuary who is

retiring after a working life at Woodmen of the World Insurance Co. in Omaha, Nebraska. He and his wife have bought a 35-foot Winnebago Adventurer which they had thought to use in retirement. But unfortunately, his wife dies just days after this retirement. The film then becomes a road movie when Warren decides to set off in his Winnebago to revisit the places across the American Midwest that has had significance in his life. His final destination is Denver, where his daughter is about to marry a man that Warren is sure is wrong for her.

One night as he aimlessly flicks through the TV channels, he is drawn to a message from a world children's charity inviting the viewer to consider adopting a child from another country. Just \$22 a month! He adopts 6-year-old, Ndugu, who lives in Tanzania. Encouraged to write to the boy, he spills out his thoughts in long confessional letters. What we viewers are sure of is that there is no one in his life whom Schmidt would be able to talk to with such frankness. Perhaps Schmidt shares some commonality with old Eli in our story. Both seem empty of purpose and meaning in their lives. Both face the future with little hope. But each finds a way to reach out beyond themselves and in so doing find something good in them.

Perhaps the most difficult part of this story in Samuel is the challenge of the new order sweeping in to replace the old order of Eli. Samuel would in fact take the priesthood and Israel in an entirely new direction. You could say that God watches for openings and God found one in the space between the dim eyesight of Eli and the listening spirit of Samuel. And Samuel heard the voice of God in that space. But it took the gracious exit of Eli and the old establishment to make way for God's new day with Samuel.

I wonder if we are quite so willing to make way for the new. I look around our Presbytery and our churches and what do I see? Like us here in West Flamboro the majority our leadership and decision makers are grey-haired and from a past generation. We are people who grew up in a church that was still reasonably healthy and vibrant. Like the Trust company I worked for in 1964 in Toronto, conservative, rule-based leaders set the agenda and the climate. We had to wear dark suits, white shirts, and preferably vote conservative. This is a world we have lost forever! So too is it a world that is lost forever in

our churches. But, from my observations of churches over the past thirty years, I have witnessed incredible resistance to this reality.

My question for us today is simple: do we have such a listening spirit as Samuel? Have we allowed any space between the way we have always done church and a new generation growing up in front of us? That same God found an opening between the dim life-weariness of Warren Schmidt and the life-hungry attentiveness of Ndugu half a world away. And Warren heard the voice of God in that space. Where in your life does such a space exist? Can God find any space there? And what will grow in that space should you allow it over the next ten years?

Many of us are like Warren Schmidt. We want to know that our lives make a difference, and that they have a meaning beyond mere existence. To be assured of this we need to make spaces in our lives for God's presence. The great danger is that our lives become so cluttered that we make no room for God. When that happens we become like old Eli, dim of sight and out of touch with God's realm. But when there is space in our lives God enables us to see properly, opens us up to mentoring the young, and alive to participate in the building of God's church for a new age. And that new age is here now! Are we prepared to shift with the times?

**Amen**