

Speaking the Truth
I Samuel 3:1-20
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
January 17, 2021
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In Hans Christian Andersen's story, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, we hear a tale of deception and truth telling as two swindlers come to town pretending to be weavers of "the most magnificent fabrics imaginable."¹

These two take advantage of the emperor's love of fancy clothing and promise to weave him something that will bring awe upon the people. Instead of fabric, they weave a tale so convincing that even though no one can see the fabric they claim to be making, they are also unwilling to tell the truth of the deception for fear that it is not the weavers, but they themselves who are wrong.

And so the day comes when the emperor goes to parade through town wearing his new clothes. And while person after person pretends to see his magnificent clothing, it is only a young child who is willing to tell the truth. "But he hasn't got anything on,' a little child said."² And only then would others name the truth that had been in front of them all along.

Typically when we hear the story that Terry and Laurie read for us today, we only read the first ten verses. In fact, when it shows up in the lectionary it appears as I Samuel 3:1-10 with verses 11-20 listed in parenthesis, meaning they are optional. And most of the time, preachers opt out.

After all if we only read the first half then we have a nice call story. We have a story of hope. We have a story of possibility with a young person hearing the voice of God. We have a story that leads us to consider the ways God is speaking to us, and that encourages our willingness to hear.

And those are important themes.

Meanwhile, they are not the whole of this story. Because this isn't just a story about Samuel's call or about a young child leading, but it is a story that reminds us, as does *The Emperor's New Clothes*, of the value of truth and the courage it takes to speak it.

Let's remember what was going on at this time. As Richard Boyce writes, "This passage stands at the beginning of the stories of kingship in Judah and Israel, a time when God's people grew weary with the occasional service of the judges who rescued them when their disobedience made them prey to their enemies. Now Israel began to long for a king, like the nations round about them. From the beginning, this concentration of power in the hands of a human being, versus the strong arm of the

¹ [Hans Christian Andersen : The Emperor's New Clothes \(sdu.dk\)](http://sdu.dk)

² [Hans Christian Andersen : The Emperor's New Clothes \(sdu.dk\)](http://sdu.dk)

Lord, was fraught with difficulty....Thus the story begins on an ominous note. Not only is 'the word of the Lord...rare in those days,' but the leadership over Israel is corrupt."³

And let us be clear...the problem wasn't that God had abandoned them or stopped speaking, but it is much more likely that the issue at hand is that the people had stopped listening...perhaps they had forgotten how.

So into this story comes Samuel, a boy who has been raised in the temple, nurtured by the priest, Eli. Samuel ended up there because his mother, barren for most of her life, is said to have prayed so hard for a child that she committed to dedicating him to God's service. And she did. Once he was born and as soon as he was weaned, Hannah took her child to be raised in the temple of God.

Fast forward, several years later, and we meet Samuel again. His mentor, Eli, is growing old and going blind. In the middle of the night Samuel hears a voice and believes it to be Eli, needing some assistance. But he goes to Eli once, twice, three times until finally Eli himself realizes what is happening. God is speaking. And so Samuel is sent to lie down again, but should he hear the voice, he is to answer, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (10b).

And that is what Samuel does. However, the word he hears is something he would rather not hear. It is a word against his mentor because of the behavior of Eli's sons. It is a word that no one, let alone a twelve year old, would want to take to someone about whom they cared, someone they held in high regard.

So as morning arrived, we can almost envision Samuel just going about his business, hoping that Eli would have even forgotten the night's happenings. But instead of forgetting, it is Eli who calls Samuel, and scripture tells us that not only did he ask what God said, but he implored Samuel not to hide it from him.

In what was inevitably the most difficult conversation in Samuel's life so far, and one of the most difficult in his entire life, Eli created a safe space for truth telling.

And, friends, we cannot minimize the power of that act. See, too often we get to this story and we dismiss Eli. We note that he was a bad father, that his sons had grown up to be corrupt. We may even blame him for his own failing. But once we travel down that road we forget to remember that all of us are complex with successes and failures to our name. We forget to remember that Eli was a good mentor to Samuel. And we forget to remember that Eli helped make truth telling possible for Samuel on this early morning in the temple.

As Samuel grew into a prophet, one who would often be called to speak the truth to power, his ability to do so began here in "both the attentiveness of the young Samuel's ears and the wisdom of the old priest's heart and mind..."⁴

³ Richard Boyce, "Exegetical Perspective on I Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20)" in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 243.

⁴ Boyce, 245.

As Richard Boyce writes, “At this point in the story, when words from the Lord are rare, this listening and hearing becomes a communal affair, dependent on both the hearing and the speaking of the community together.”⁵

And, friends, we need this truth telling in these days. We need communities that will listen and speak together, that will discern God’s truth together.

See, too often we have avoided telling difficult truths, especially to those in power. Too often we have created communities and families and workplaces where it is not safe to do so. Too often we have chosen to “not rock the boat” instead of speaking a word of truth.

And we have not nurtured people to receive difficult truth either. How different would this story be if Eli had refused to listen? If Eli had struck out at Samuel? If Eli had responded with defensiveness and denial? But instead, he created safe space for Samuel to speak even when Eli was the one most impacted by the difficult truth that was shared.

But too often we sweep truth under the rug. We don’t tell truth because it’s easier to ignore it or because we fear the retaliation that will happen if we do or because we think we’re trying to keep the peace. And so, we keep family secrets...there are parts of our church histories we simply don’t talk about...We rewrite the history of nations and civilizations to paint a pretty picture, and of course this is easier when it is the victors who are doing the writing.

Yet, we claim to be followers of Jesus, one who lived in the way of the prophets, one who was considered a prophet by some and savior by others, but who never hesitated to speak truth to power. And so, from the stories of Samuel to prophets like Micah and Amos and Isaiah to Jesus, we are called again and again to not only be truth tellers but to nurture space where truth can be told.

And, this feels even more difficult and more important these days when the idea of truth seems to have broken down, when we often can’t even seem to agree upon what truth is. And so we need places where we can see each other’s humanity, where we will listen even when it is difficult and where we can speak without fear.

We need people with whom to discern God’s voice. We need the courage to speak the truth even when it is difficult. We need the willingness to set down our own defenses. We need to be willing to risk easy peace and to enter into productive conflict in order to speak the truth.

Friends, speaking truth is not always easy. But as people of faith, it is a task to which we are called. It is core to the heart of God, whose truth will set us free. It is necessary if we are to build communities of justice and compassion. It is essential if we hope, with God, to bring about the kin-dom. May it be so.

⁵ Boyce, 247.