

Epiphany 2 / January 14, 2024

1 Samuel 2:10

“Speak for your servant hears.”

Imagine lying in bed and just as you are drifting into sleep, you hear a voice calling your name? It would be kind of scary if you lived alone! The young man Samuel was just drifting off to sleep when he heard his name called twice, “Samuel!” “Samuel!” Samuel didn’t live alone. He lived with the high priest Eli in the Lord’s temple, which at that time was the tent or tabernacle, constructed after the exodus from Egypt. Naturally Samuel thought Eli, who was a very elderly man, was calling for assistance. After being called three times and running to Eli each time, the high priest realized it was the Lord who was calling Samuel. If it happened again, he told him to say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant hears.” It was the word of the Lord coming to Samuel. Samuel did as Eli told him. Speak, Lord for your servant hears.

The word of the Lord came to Samuel, not just to chat, but to bring an important message to Eli. The word of the Lord told Samuel the judgement against Eli’s house. Eli was judged, because his sons were abusing their privilege as priests and dishonouring the name of the Lord and Eli did not stop them. In the morning Samuel was afraid to tell Eli the word of the Lord. Eli was the high priest of Israel. He was Samuel’s guardian. He was a father to Samuel. Samuel doubtless felt sorrow for Eli over the judgement he was to deliver. Samuel could have lied and said the voice never spoke again. He could have told Eli something different to avoid the consequences of sharing a hard message. Samuel told Eli the whole message. While he was Eli’s helper and foster child, he was the Lord’s servant. The Lord’s servants speak His word.

The prophet Samuel is an important person in the history of ancient Israel. He is important as a prophet who spoke the Lord’s word, anointed Israel’s first kings and prepared for the coming of the great king, the Lord Jesus Christ. He was pivotal as a leader through whom the Lord brought Israel out of a dark time of violence and false worship. He oversaw the transition of Israel from a loose confederacy with no central government, to a united kingdom. Samuel lived during the time of the Judges. It was a period of roughly two and half centuries. It began with the death of Joshua and ended with the kingship of Saul. The term “Judges” in this context is misleading. We might think of law and order, but there was little law and general disorder throughout the period of the judges. It was a brutal time. Might made right. Each tribe did as they pleased, occasionally breaking into civil war.

The people closed their ears to the Lord’s words, repeatedly turned away and worshiped the gods of the nations. Whenever they abandoned the Lord, He allowed their enemies to oppress them. Eventually the people would repent and cry to the Lord for help. The Lord would send a judge to deliver them. Rather than a legal representative as we use the term, the majority of these judges were warriors, who rallied the troops so the oppressed tribes could gain their freedom. The people served the Lord until the judge died. Then the cycle would repeat. The book of Judges ends, saying, “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

Samuel was different. He didn’t do what was right in his eyes or even in his self-interest. He listened to the Word of the Lord and did what the Word said. He listened, took the Lord’s word to heart and spoke it faithfully, even when it put him in threat of danger. Most importantly, Samuel as prophet, priest and anointer of kings, prepared for the coming of Jesus, the Word of God made flesh. Samuel served the Lord faithfully in his time. He continues to serve as an example of faith and faithfulness, that we too may listen when the Lord speaks, take His words to heart and follow Him in faith and faithfulness. Speak, Lord for your servant hears.

The Lord raised up Samuel to serve as a judge in Israel. As a judge Samuel served according to the pattern of Christ as a prophet, priest and governor. Samuel shared in the prophetic task of speaking the word of the Lord. He made a circuit of the tribes, judging, teaching, offering sacrifice and praying. He was a unifying force within Israel. Samuel was a priest from the tribe of Levi. Samuel was a prophet. The prophetic word first came to him as he ministered in the tabernacle. As a prophet, priest and leader, Samuel taught the people the Lord’s word and encouraged them to walk in His ways.

As a judge Samuel heard cases and settled disputes according to the Lord’s word, His holy Law. He and Deborah are the only two judges shown acting in a judicial manner. As judge, he brought stability and order to the tribes. In his governing role he prepared Israel for the transition from a loose, unstable confederacy, to a kingdom united under a monarchy. Samuel prepared Israel to receive her first kings. In this he was like John the Baptist, who prepared a later generation for the coming of the Christ, Israel’s greatest king. Ultimately Samuel and all the prophets lead us to Jesus, our Saviour and King and the sacrifice of His cross for the forgiveness of our sin and eternal salvation.

Samuel didn't baptize with water, he anointed with oil, which was a type of baptism. Samuel anointed Israel's first two kings. Saul from the tribe of Benjamin and David who succeeded Saul, from the tribe of Judah. John the Baptist would later anoint Jesus in baptism to mark Him as the Great King, the eternal and beloved Son of God. In his service Samuel acted as prophet, priest and governor. Samuel prophesied the coming of Jesus the Christ, by laying the groundwork for the monarchy, in particular the monarchy of David, through whom Jesus descends according to His human nature.

Samuel prefigured Jesus in his service as a prophet, king and priest. A priest prays and offers sacrifices for the people. A king governs the people as the under shepherd to the Lord, the Great Shepherd. A prophet speaks the word of the Lord. When the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel, he responded, "Speak for your servant hears." Prophets speak the Lord's word. The Lord's prophets listen to the Lord before they speak for the Lord. Most importantly, the words of the prophets lead us to Jesus. He is the word of the Lord who became flesh that He would be our Saviour and we would have life in His name. Speak Lord for your servant hears.

We remember Samuel as a servant of the Lord, who listened and faithfully spoke the Lord's word. We remember Samuel as a member of the company of the prophets, all of whom in some way testified to the coming of Jesus. It says in Revelation, "Testimony to Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." Testimony to Jesus is the spirit of prophecy, the essence of our faith and the key to understanding scripture. Jesus is the key by which the meaning of Scripture is unlocked. In Jesus we see God's holy law fulfilled. In Jesus' sacrificial death we see the just punishment of sin, which He suffered for all people. In Jesus' resurrection we see the pardon of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life, offered for all to receive, given to all believers baptized into His death and resurrection. The ultimate purpose for which the scriptures were written was so we would believe Jesus is the Christ our Saviour and have life in His name.

In Samuel we see a foreshadowing of Jesus our prophet, priest and king. Jesus is the great Prophet, whom Moses said would come after him. He speaks the word of God, not as a human intermediary, like the prophets. He speaks as the very Word of God made flesh. The author Hebrews said, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son." The apostles listened to Jesus' words and recognized Him as God's Son. They confessed, "You have the words of eternal life. And we know and believe that you are the Holy One of God." The words of Samuel, the prophets and apostles lead us to Jesus. Their words show Him to be our Saviour, priest and king. Speak, Lord for your servant hears.

Jesus is our great High Priest, Saviour and King. He intercedes for us in heaven. He sacrificed Himself on the cross for the atonement of the sin of the world. He covers our sins in forgiveness through the word and washing of holy baptism. He rose the third day to show He is our Lord and God and His words are truth and life. True prophets such as Samuel were faithful to the word of the Lord in life and death. Jesus was faithful to the word of the Lord in life, death and resurrection. Jesus is our King. He reigns in our hearts through His Spirit. He upholds our faith and leads in righteous paths through the hearing of His word.

God bless us to hear His word in faith, saying in our hearts "Speak O Lord for your servant listens." In His Name. Amen.