

**The Dance of Generations**  
**The Second Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Sunday, January 17, 2021**  
**The Rev. Paul McLain**

'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'  
In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

In our Old Testament reading of the story of God's call to Samuel to be a prophet, Eli, the aging high priest of Shiloh, stands out as a tragic figure with whom we can sympathize. His eyesight has begun to grow dim. His family has fallen apart. His two sons, who were to be the inheritors of his priesthood, had completely defiled their offices. Eli tried to discipline them, but to no avail.

One day, a woman named Hannah came into the temple. She had been childless for many years. She wept bitterly, said a prayer, and made a vow that if she were blessed with a son, she would dedicate him to the service of God. Eli observed Hannah, came over, and assured her that God would grant her request. She gave birth to a son and named him Samuel. After Samuel no longer needed to be nursed, Hannah was true to her vow and brought the boy to Eli to grow up and to serve in the temple. Eli probably felt like he had failed as a father to his sons. He was determined not to fail Samuel as his mentor.

We feel a kindred spirit to Eli because we are tired. We have gone through nearly a year of darkness and we are in need of new light, new energy, and perhaps even a new and positive challenge. The opportunity to mentor provides all that.

Many of us have been the beneficiaries of gracious mentors, and, in many cases, we still receive and value their wisdom. Hopefully, we offer ourselves as mentors to pay forward a little of what they have given us. But even the language just used evokes a misconception that the mentor is the giver and the mentee is the receiver.

Parker Palmer writes: 'Age and experience have taught me that mentoring is not a one-way street. It's a mutuality in which two persons evoke the potentials in each other. Equally important, mentoring gives us a chance to welcome one another into a relationship that honors our vulnerability and our need for each other. Mentoring is a gift exchange in which we elders receive at least as much as we give, often more.'

Eli found that true as well. When Samuel heard a voice repeatedly calling his name, he thought it was Eli's voice and he went to him twice. The third time it happened Eli realized that God was calling Samuel. He gave Samuel counsel on what to do next. Eli guided him to answer God with these words, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' Eli taught Samuel that the first step in receiving a call from God is to listen with the open and humble heart of a servant.

God did speak to Samuel, but the message was not good news for Eli or his sons. There would be judgement for his son's atrocities, and judgement for Eli for not being able to stop them. Samuel was reluctant to share this message with his mentor.

But Eli taught him another lesson. He instructed Samuel not to hide the message from him, even if it contained hard truths. Eli taught Samuel the second lesson of being a prophet: have the courage to tell truth to power. Samuel told him all of the Lord's vision for Eli's family.

Eli then held back his personal grief, and taught Samuel the third lesson of being a prophet: Receive the word of the Lord, even when it has tough personal consequences. In doing so, Eli taught Samuel the fourth lesson: Recognize the trustworthy voice of a new prophet.

Samuel gave Eli some gifts as well. He gave Eli the gifts of exercising his priesthood, of offering his wisdom, of still being useful, of finding some redemption, of giving birth to a new voice.

Richard Boyce writes: 'It takes both the attentiveness of the young Samuel's ears and the wisdom of the old priest's heart and mind to birth the new office of prophet in the service of the Lord. Likewise, it takes both the authority of this failing priest and the obedience of this youthful protégé to bring the Lord's judgement to fruition.'

There could be no Samuel without an Eli. And there could be no Eli without a Samuel. Samuel went on to live out the lessons Eli taught him. He stood up to kings, He told truth to power. And he never stopped listening to the voice of God.

This week, we honor the birthday of another great prophet and we inaugurate a new President. Martin Luther King, Jr. would be the first to admit that he stood on the shoulders of many mentors including Howard Thurman, who Scott preached about last week. Thurman taught King the principle of non-violence and he became the quiet conscience of his movement.

Joe Biden also had many mentors along the way, including the former Senate majority leader, Mike Mansfield as well as a Republican senator, John McCain. After the fatal accident involving his family members, Biden thought about not being sworn in as a Senator. It was Mike Mansfield who persuaded him to serve and gave him the behind-the-scenes support he needed to be both a father and a Senator.

John McCain served as the Navy liaison to the Senate and taught Biden much about the military. Biden later encouraged McCain to run for office. The two of them shared the Allegheny College Prize for Civility in Public Life. They both chose to receive the prize in person, they paid heartfelt tributes to each other and they shook hands on stage. We are all the products of our mentors and our mentees.

Parker Palmer concludes: 'Mentors and apprentices are partners in an ancient human dance, and one of teaching's greatest rewards is the daily chance it gives us to get back on the dance floor. It is the dance of the spiraling generations, in which the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with their new life, reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn.'

The story of Eli and Samuel is a model for this dance of the generations as we together listen for the voice and for our call from God to bring life and light and hope for a new day. *Amen.*