

Commencement

Reading from the Old Testament: 1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-21a)

Reading from the New Testament: Romans 12:1-2

My cousin Ned is a dairy farmer in Ohio, farming the same land his father farmed before him. Some years ago I heard a relative ask Ned's adolescent son, Todd, the one question most adults blurt out in awkward desperation when obliged into conversation with anyone not old enough to have a driver's license: "So, what do you want to be when you grow up?" And before Todd could respond, his dad's voice intruded from the background: "Well, until he's 18, he wants to be a farmer."

Anyone with a background in agriculture knows that parenthood isn't just about the beatific joy of holding your newborn in your embrace, it is also about acquiring a workforce and maintaining an essential institution for the feeding of the world. Years have passed since I overheard Ned's opinion on the matter and Todd is well beyond eighteen. Yet, Todd continues to farm the land along with his father. In fact, Todd is the 6th generation of the family to farm that parcel of Ohio's rich earth. I don't know if farming will always be Todd's life's work, but like many he didn't discover farming, or law, or ministry, or baseball as he *reached for the stars, unafraid of failure, in pursuit of his*

passion, on the first day of the rest of his life carried forth on the wings of some wretched commencement cliché. Rather, Todd was born into farming just as some of my colleagues were born into preaching, or just as some of my classmates were born into engineering or law enforcement or trucking or electrical work or hardware. The pastor of 1st Presbyterian uptown is a sixth generation pastor; not only that, his father, mother, sister, and wife are all pastors. I had a classmate in high school who everybody envied just a bit. His dad was a local car dealer and everyone just assumed he would have it made, taking over the family dealership, driving a new car every year.

We find ourselves in the trough between the annual big waves of odiously clichéd commencement addresses. Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Seminary observed that when his daughter graduated from college he was dismayed to hear the commencement speaker peddling the same drivel he had heard when he graduated. The speaker “looked out at 5,000 young lives and proclaimed: ‘You are among the brightest and best we have ever seen. Set your goals high. Dream your own dreams. Chase your own star, and you can be whatever you want to be.’

You'd need a calculator to keep up with the clichés in that one. Did you know there is actually a game graduates like to play when enduring their commencement addresses? It's called *Commencement Speech Bingo*. The creators culled through one year's graduation speeches collecting the top 24 clichés to place on a bingo card so that you can keep up with the flood of platitudes at your commencement to compare with your friends at other colleges. So, instead of reaching for the stars, you can just reach for the card to bide the time until you can throw your cap in the air.

Barnes says, "It's staggering that these ridiculously untrue claims still have a viable shelf life. No graduating class is the brightest and best; for years we've all been pretty evenly flawed. And while chasing stars sounds wonderful, the Bible makes it clear that even the Magi get lost in such a pursuit. But the biggest lie is that we can be whatever we want to be." Hence, the Panthers are not going to be calling on me fill in for Luke Kuechley ... ever!

Today's text is a call story, but Samuel wasn't called into the role of priest and prophet in the traditional sense. He was born into it. In fact, you could even go so far as to say he was conceived into it.

Having a child in the midst of the injustices of the Patriarchal era wasn't all about love and maternal instinct; it was also about survival in a culture where the failure to provide a male heir put a woman at great risk. And so it was that the childless Hannah was to be found on her knees at the tabernacle in a state of quiet, tortured desperation. Eli the aging and weary priest saw Hannah in a clearly agitated state, and probably rolling his eyes as if to say, "Man, I ain't got time for this," Eli noticed something strange. The scriptures say, "Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard." How haunting and yet familiar to those at the intersection of desperate and dark.

Eli, obviously not on his A game, assumed Hannah was drunk. "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." 15 But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. 16 Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." 17 Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." Could it be

that Eli was just saying some half-hearted blessing in order to extricate himself from Hannah's presence? Something like, "Sooo yeah ... Well bless you; and if you'll excuse me I have an appointment."

In any case Hannah took Eli at his word and went home, only to return later so that she could be true to the promise she had made to God. You see, Hannah had promised God, right there at the tabernacle, that if she had a son, she would return to give him to the Lord. I guess you could say Hannah, instead of being a stage mom was more of an altar mom. The scripture tells us that each year Hannah would make Samuel a little robe for him to wear while performing his priestly tasks at the tabernacle. Well isn't that sweet; probably sewed his name on the inside of it and gave him a child-sized scroll with the 10 Commandments on it.

The scripture says, "Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people." So, Samuel was a good boy, but he had not chosen this path as the dream job for which he had labored. Rather, Samuel had been inserted into to this life. Up to this point, this life had chosen him. In fact, when the voice does come directly to Samuel in today's text he doesn't recognize it,

thinking it must be Eli calling him. The text reads, “Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.”

Around the same time, Eli’s own sons, Hophni and Phinehas had entered the family business and were making quite a name for themselves, but not in a good way. They were stealing the meat that people had offered for sacrifice and Harvey-Weinsteining the women who ventured near the temple. And the Lord looked down upon his temple and thought, *Oi vey!* Sounds like we may be past the *performance improvement plan* stage there at the temple and headed toward the *regime change* stage. And Samuel’s the guy the Lord tabs to not only hand out the pink slips but to also fill the role of Eli as judge, priest, and prophet. Samuel is the one the Lord chooses to lead Israel through the critical transition from being a loose confederation of tribes into a nation.

It is not a vocation Samuel chooses after taking a Myers-Briggs test and reading *What Color Is My Parachute*. There are no college tours, Duke *TIP* programs, or studies abroad. God calls Samuel and

Samuel gets to work. God chose Samuel. Samuel didn't choose the *Temple* life. And Samuel's first task is certainly no picnic.

I was talking with a parent this week who's truly gifted and talented college graduate achieved the dream of getting a great job in her field in the big city, but now, she's a bit disillusioned because the job/lifestyle isn't quite what she thought it would be. Been there? Done that? Real world isn't what the college websites and *Corona* commercials portray it to be.

God says, "Okay Samuel, welcome to Sovereignty Systems Inc. Here's your list and I need it to be done yesterday. God assigns Samuel the responsibility to let Eli know that whatever the color of Eli's parachute is, it's not golden, and anyone who has ever been laid off, phased out, or retired early knows exactly what I'm talking about.

Samuel doesn't want to do it, or more precisely, Samuel's afraid to confront Eli. But here's the poignancy of our text. Eli knows his skills have waned, his leadership has lost its credibility, and his professional and parental methods, regardless of his intentions, have brought disastrous consequences. Yet, rather than destroying the institution or

undermining his successor, Eli helps Samuel to find his way, counseling him about what to say and how to respond. Even when Samuel delivers the bad news, Eli receives it with equanimity: "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

Eli is not a bad guy and Samuel is certainly no saint. They are just two people of faith trying to navigate their way through the fog blanketed shoals of purpose and circumstance, floating on (as my theology professor used to say) the border between that which we make, shape and control; and that which makes shapes and controls us. This isn't some Monty Python, King Arthur moment here – "The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water, signifying by divine providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur."

Eli like Samuel after him was born into his vocation more than being drawn to it as the Excalibur of childhood dreams. As important as their roles are to the story of Israel, they are not the characters of Renaissance paintings walking around with glowing golden halos above their heads. Rather, they are ordinary people in an extraordinary drama, much like you and me. And that's the beauty of the narrative

we're looking at this summer. These are not the demigods of Greek mythology, an elevated, uncommonly gifted, stratum of the best and the brightest far different than you or me. No, to purloin a phrase from your tear-teasing, must-see tv binge fest, *this is us*, those blessed with some gifts and several flaws, our resumes dotted with false starts and errant diversions along with miniature triumphs and a couple of shining moments accompanied by our share of humiliating gaffes, tortured relationships, a basket of treasured memories and an old shoebox stuffed with regrets. This is us, and just as with Eli and Samuel, this is where God does God's work and where God calls us to roll up our sleeves and join the effort.

Paul puts it this way in Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God." And in 2 Corinthians: "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

You are the best and the brightest! Well, you may be pretty bright, but not necessarily any more than any other generation, and in my experience even the supposedly best and brightest can still make some

pretty bonehead choices. *You can be anything you want to be!* You can be a lot of things, but anything you want? I'm not so sure about that. Did you know that only about 27% of college graduates are working in a field related to their major? (*Washington Post, 2013*) Remember my classmate whom everyone envied because he had the security of knowing he would take over his father's car dealership? You know, they don't make Oldsmobiles anymore and he never moved back home anyway.

Craig Barnes again reflects, "When my friends and I were leaving college, we thought the key to finding our blissfully fulfilling vocations was knowing ourselves. So we threw ourselves into lots of personality inventories ... We chased fulfillment like it was the Holy Grail.

"Before leaving college, burdened by the need to assemble my life, I took a trip to visit my widowed grandmother so I could ask her, "Was Granddaddy fulfilled as a tobacco farmer?" She cocked her head, confused by my question. I had to explain the concept of fulfillment to her. After this went on for a while she finally shrugged and said, "I don't know, honey. He was a farmer." (*Craig Barnes, Christian Century*)

The commencement speakers would have you think there is some magical place called fulfillment that you can choose and labor to achieve, and most people buy what they are selling, but fulfillment, wholeness isn't found somewhere out there. It's experienced in the here and now even among the detritus of our wrong turns, false starts and flaws, as we stop hyperventilating over what we want and start listening for what God provides and where God calls us to go. Amen.