

reading the Bible with Luther



Session 14:

1 Samuel 1-3—“The Word of the LORD was rare in those days.”

by Virgil Thompson

The story of Samuel begins on an ominous note: “*The Word of the Lord was rare in those days*” (1 Samuel 3:1).

The Word Rarely Preached

If we were talking about a New York beef steak, rare would not necessarily be a bad thing. In fact, viewed in that way, I’d have to admit an appetite for a “rare” Word of the Lord. I appreciate students of the Word—whether preachers in the pulpit or friends across the table—in whom the Word of the Lord is still cooking, not completely done. The preached Word of the Lord calls forth the congregation—as once it called forth Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Ruth, and now Samuel—in the promise of what believers are destined to become in God’s unfailing commitment to sinners. In fact, the Gospel writer Luke characterizes the community of faith precisely as the people of the “Way,” namely the way of God’s forgiveness of sinners (see Acts 9:2; 18:25–26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14).

The Word of God, “rare” in that sense, is to faith the sustenance of life. This is exactly the promise of the Lord’s Supper:

Take and eat; this is My body, which is given for you... In the same way also after supper He took the cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, Take and drink of it all of you. This is... the New Testament which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”

It would also be a good thing if the verse from 1 Samuel was talking about the rareness of the Word in the dictionary sense of “*unusually great, admirable, exemplary!*” In that sense the church could do with more “rare” witness to the Word of the Lord. I recently ran across such a “rare” testimony to the truth of God. It was a sermon for Lent and Holy Week by Steven Paulson. The sermon, titled “He Stinketh!”, proclaims the Word by which Jesus raised His friend, Lazarus, from the dead. It is a remarkable sermon. (But don’t take my word for it. You can read the sermon for yourself. It is posted on

the internet at LutheranQuarterly.com. It’s a rare sermon, one you can sink your teeth into, one that doesn’t merely talk about new life, but one that actually gives new life to faith.)

Unfortunately, that’s not the rareness that our verse from 1 Samuel has in mind, but just the opposite. At the time of Samuel, the Word of the Lord as a life-giving Word was rarely—infrequently—heard among the people of God. At that time, care of the community had been entrusted to Eli. As Roy Harrisville declared of Eli in a sermon I still remember from over 40 years ago in seminary chapel,

Now Eli was surely no great shakes. His sermons consisted of little speeches on morality that allowed there was nothing to be done for sinners. After all, as Eli rationalized, ‘If someone sins against the Lord, who can make intercession?’” — 1 Samuel 2:25

Eli’s failure to proclaim God’s Law and Gospel proved fatal for him. “*On that day,*” the Lord declared, “*I will punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew...*” (3:12). Apparently, in God’s Book, there is no sin greater than failing to proclaim the Law–Gospel Word of the Lord.

Fortunately, the Lord has a long history of not leaving His people at the mercy of shepherds who take no interest in preaching the Word, to say nothing of exploiting the very people entrusted to their care (see 1 Samuel 2:22–25). The Lord God, more than once, has intervened in the life of the community of faith to see that His Word of Law and Promise is proclaimed in its power and purity. The story of Samuel is about the Lord God taking the bull by the horns and raising up a preacher to proclaim His truth.

The Calling to Which Samuel Was Called

As the Lord explained, once He got Samuel’s undivided attention: “*I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle*” (3:11). Samuel didn’t need to think too long about what to do in the face of God’s promise—he was all ears: “*Speak, Lord, for*

your servant is listening” (3:10). In 1 Samuel 1–3 we have the beginning of the story of how the “*LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD. And [how] the word of Samuel came to all Israel*” (1 Samuel 3:29-4:1).

Our story begins where the story of faith frequently begins: at home in the life of the family. Not that all families in the community of faith are paragons of harmony and health. Samuel’s family, like many families in the Holy Bible, suffered its measure of dysfunction. Luther often observed that he was strangely comforted by the dysfunction of the Biblical saints. Even in the Bible, saints come in only one variety: forgiven sinners. In the case of Samuel’s family, the trouble began with his father, Elkanah, who had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. With Peninnah, Elkanah had many children. Hannah, however, remained childless year after year. And Peninnah didn’t let her forget it. She took every opportunity to rub it in. Hannah was literally wasting away under the weight of her shame, to say nothing of Peninnah’s continual harassment.

It’s no shame that a woman should remain childless. But you couldn’t tell Hannah that. All of Elkanah’s efforts to comfort Hannah were to no avail. We might imagine, as I suspect Hannah may have imagined, that part of Hannah’s problem was Elkanah himself. By way of comfort, for example, Elkanah offered: “*Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?*” (1:8). A real Casanova, that Elkanah.

Hannah, No Shrinking Violet

Hannah could be an example to us all in our time of spiritual anguish. She takes the bull of her shame by the horns. As a woman of faith she knows exactly what to do in a time of trouble. She goes directly to the temple. After all, has not the Lord God promised to His people, “*Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will answer*”? So Hannah prays her heart out:

O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death” — 1 Samuel 1:11

At the time, that dimly burning bulb of a pastor, Father Eli, was on duty in the temple (3:2–3). Incapable of distinguishing the “anguish-of-spirit” from “under-the-influence-of-spirits,” Eli takes Hannah for an early morning drunk and gives her “what-for”: “*How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine,*” he orders (1:14).

Hannah explains the “what-for” to Father Eli, who at least

has the good sense to grant from the LORD God the fulfillment of her petition. On that note Hannah goes home, “*eats and drinks with her husband, and,*” as the Bible tells it, “*her countenance was sad no longer*” (1:18). There must have been more than eating and drinking upon Hannah’s return home to her husband, because nine months later a son was born to the happy couple. Hannah named the newborn infant Samuel, for as she explained, “*I have asked him of the LORD*” (1:20). That is exactly what the name Samuel means: “sent direct from God.” As we shall hear, Samuel was sent direct from God to the people of faith as a Law–Gospel preacher of the LORD’s Word.

In her joy at the birth of a son, Hannah did not forget where thanks was due. Her prayer of thanksgiving is one of the most beautiful passages in the entire Bible. In fact, Mary’s prayer of thanksgiving at the announcement of her Son’s conception is patterned after Hannah’s prayer (compare 1 Samuel 2:1–10 with Luke 1:46–55).

My heart exults in the Lord ... There is no Holy One like the Lord ... The Lord kills and brings to life; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; He brings low, he also exalts.

In the Lord’s Service

As promised, Hannah delivers Samuel to the service of the LORD, and the LORD makes him into a Law–Gospel preacher of the Word. Samuel is given God’s not-particularly-cheering Word of judgment to proclaim to Eli:

On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from the beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them.” — 1 Sam. 3:12–13

The story of Samuel makes it clear that God does not take lightly the failure to preach His Word in the fullness of Law and Promise. Because faith lives solely by the Word of the

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Lord, nothing threatens our life together as much as a failure to proclaim the Word of God as we have received it. This is in part what Luther was speaking about when he observed that the road to hell is paved with the skulls of priests. Of course, pastors do not have the market cornered on the proclamation of God's Word. All Christians may give voice to the Word of the Lord. But our pastors are called to the public proclamation of God's Word. Preaching is the chief calling of the pastor.

Members of the congregation are called individually to all varieties of vocational service, from Astrophysicist to Zamboni Driver and everything in between—including mother and father, cook and clerk, dancer and doctor, engineer and entertainer, factory worker and farmer, lawyer, nurse, politician, realtor, soldier, teacher and undertaker. All are

essential vocations. Without them the life of the world would cease to go 'round. These callings are no less sacred than the vocation of publicly proclaiming God's Word. As Paul declares, "*varieties of gifts, but one Spirit*" (1 Corinthians 12:4). But it is the public preaching of the Word that keeps us free for the service of our individual vocations.

Looking Ahead: Israel Demands a King

In the next episode of the story (1 Samuel 4–12), God makes good His threat against the household of Eli, Samuel grows old and Israel demands a king. Samuel warns the people that kings are not everything they are cracked up to be, but the people persist in their desire to be like other nations—ruled by a king. Eventually Samuel gives in to the demand. Whether it was a good thing or not, there is the rest of the story to tell.

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Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series offers suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. Luther, as you may recall from earlier episodes of our study, contended that theological existence involves three elements: study of God's Word, prayer and spiritual struggle. In that sense Samuel's mother, Hannah, is a model to us all. In her spiritual struggle she prays to God for deliverance: "*I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord ... out of my great anxiety and vexation,*" as she explains to Eli. In Hannah's case, spiritual anxiety and vexation did not alienate her from God, but became the occasion for her to draw closer to God in prayer for help. Spiritual struggle does not, however, always draw a person closer to God. Sometimes life's troubles drive a wedge between believers and the Lord God. How does the story of Samuel shape Christian witness as it speaks to the person who is struggling with shame, disappointment, anxiety and vexation? Reflect specifically about your own experience and the experience of friends in this regard.
2. The Biblical story does not devote much space to the relationship between Elkanah, Hannah and Peninnah, but it is still worth our attention. Review that portion of the

story (1 Samuel 1:1–8). How would you characterize the relationship? In what ways is it similar and dissimilar to family relationships today?

3. The central theme of Samuel's story in the first three chapters revolves around his call to proclaim God's Word in power and purity. We have characterized the Word of God as Law and Gospel. In what sense exactly is the Word of God's Law and Gospel?
4. As you think about Samuel's story, consider the questions below:
 - a. *What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about the story?*
 - b. *What background knowledge would help me understand the story more clearly? How does my experience help to understand the story?*
 - c. *What does this story promise to faith? What does this book demand of faith?*

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