

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
January 18, 2008

1 Samuel 3: 1-10

INAUGURAL EVENTS

Inaugural, to inaugurate: it is right there for all to see. I think probably the entire world; certainly this country and all of the local news. It's out there to see. It's situated between inaudible and inauspicious in Webster. Inaugurate. Inauguration and even Inauguration Day. They all mean something very unique for us. Every year that is divisible by four. It is as we begin anew. We commit something amazing in all of human history. There's a formal beginning. For us it means a new term as a president.

But what did the word originally mean? What is an augur? It would surprise most of us to understand that it is the one who observes or interprets events—the sooth sayer, the prophet in the truest sense of the word. The one who forecasts what is likely to happen based on events observed. To prognosticate—to predict or forecast something in the future, from present indicators.

In many ways, Samuel was groomed especially for his role not only as a servant of God, but one who would inaugurate a different chapter in the history of Israel. For not only is he the beginning of God's word coming again into the temple; remember, Samuel is the one to anoint and select Israel's first king.

But his own inauguration happens in a tent at Shiloh, likely a tent built on a platform—a place created literally for God's presence. But in that tent God had not been recognized for some time. For not only in Eli's waning years did he develop cataracts, but the priest Eli had forgotten to listen for God's word. Yes, he had accepted Samuel as a gift to God from Hannah or more correctly a response to God's gift of new life in Hannah. In essence, Samuel was the beginning of Hannah's life beyond shame (and even eating disorders). Hannah may be the first biblical recording evidence of sadness bringing on anorexia. She was a second-class citizen in Israel until Samuel. And Samuel's inauguration is an inauguration of hope for Hannah's future.

We must not let political pundits steal the word "hope" from us as they have done so many others. Our hope is in the name of the Lord who created heaven and earth and that God alone.

There are multiple inaugurations here in these events. Eli is supposed to speak God's word, but now he perceives for the first time in a long time that that word is with him again. He has lost his sight. And he has also turned a blind eye to the next generation's reshaping of culture. Unlike our own passing of the baton in this day and time, in Eli's day and time, the baton was passed to his sons (the next generation) and they were not doing a very good job. They abused their power and exploited others. They played favorites. They bullied those who thought to be faithful. They twisted God's command-

ments about morality; and in fact, became most concerned with filling their bellies and using sex for their own fulfillment. Shiloh indeed was in a horrendous state of moral decay, and the spirit around that community saw light dissipating away. The prognosis was dim at best. The signs were everywhere.

And onto this stage comes Samuel. It's important to make note of little things—the details in this passage. Samuel is disciplined and responsive. It's not just enough to be present in that temple. But he comes when he hears Eli call and he is faithful. This discipline will turn him into a servant leader, a leader who God will equip with a gift—a gift that we still need to pray for today, a gift that we need to seek, a spiritual gift that will transform our lives together. God gave to Samuel the gift of listening. What would God want us to do?

I was pulled up short this week as my own mother was resisting the word of someone we had hired to help us; and even though I was standing there and obviously a minister, it was a care giver who stopped all the confusion and simply asked, I think, me as well as my mom, “You know in this situation, what would God want us to do? How would God want us to respond?” There was dead silence. And then we did the only thing that we could do. We said a prayer, and asked for a new beginning.

What new beginning are we being called to listen to? What new beginning is encouraging us to respond today. Carlyle Marney advised people to live on the basis of the last clear word they had heard from God. Now before we're too quick to judge Eli and his lax parenting skills and the loss of perception of God's word, what would our answer be today. If we had to say aloud—if we had to own and confess, could we identify when we last heard God's call clearly without any question? Or have we allowed that to slowly but surely slip from us. What is God's last clear word to us? And do our lifestyles reflect that? And what would our inauguration and servant leaders resemble if we had that last word firmly in our grasp.

God has spoken to us as surely as God had spoken to Samuel. And in the inauguration of Israel's next step, God has given us a covenant in Jesus Christ. And if you can't identify any other word, know that God has spoken to you. God has proclaimed his love for you in his son, Jesus. without any exception, without any precondition. God has saved us and by the Holy Spirit, we are able to respond.

Israel had attained their covenant—a covenant of the land. They had entered the promised land. And their trials and their family and their devout way of life in the wilderness was slowly becoming a distant memory. What now? What now for them? What now for us? God's answer has not changed. God's answer is to deliver us from whatever bitterness has infected our souls.

Oh, did I mention that Hannah was a little bitter about her circumstances. So bitter that her life itself was at risk and God answered. When we let bitterness be the last word we hear—when we allow bitterness to infect us—what we need is that infusion of the spirit that drives out all fear, all anger, all envy, all strife.

Out of her near death, Hannah is later certain that she no longer needs to be ashamed. Even Mary, the mother of Jesus, who risked expulsion from her community, understood the essence of God's words, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you."

God's word is the same for us, and for our officers-elect who will be installed today. God will save us from our old ways. God's word is the same as it was to Samuel, to Hannah, to Eli, and to all who would come after them. This world needs more than anything else to be saved from its selfish choices. The old way of ignoring God—of talking more than listening—is long gone. Do you hear God say to you today, "I will save you and your world just as I have in the past."

Amen. So may it be this day and always in our midst.