

# 1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a

Intro God's Speaking into the Darkness / Post Tenebras Lux May 11, 2008

When you tire of dragging yourself out of bed to come for worship, when you wonder why must you listen to lengthy sermons, if you ever find yourself just wanting church to be a little less wordy, remind yourself of your heritage by reading *The Ecclesiastical Ordinances for the Church of Geneva*, composed by John Calvin, revised by the consistory and adopted by the citizen's assembly in 1541. You may fall down with gratitude or you may recognize why God worked so powerfully at that time.

This document specified namely that:

Each Sunday there is to be a sermon at Saint Pierre and Saint Gervais at break of day, and at the usual hour (9am)...At midday, there is to be a catechism, that is, instruction of little children in all the three churches.... At three o'clock a second sermon... On working days there will be a sermon at Saint Pierre three times a week, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. (...and oh, yes, attendance was not optional!)

The hallmark of the Reformation was the centrality of God's Word, its reading, explication and application. God's Word was central to the radical change five hundred years ago. With that in view, it should not be a surprise that the motto of the reformation in Geneva was: *post tenebras lux*

...after darkness, light. The preaching schedule reflects the assumption that light for God's people comes when the word of God has free course among them. Six sermons a week in each of the three churches. John Calvin himself preached daily, during the week from the Old Testament, on the Lord's Day morning from the New and in the afternoon from the Psalms. The commitment to the proclamation of God's Word in Geneva and other cities, as the means to change the world, is well documented. As people came under the sound of God's Word proclaimed, Geneva became a beacon of light in a dark world. *Post tenebras lux*

That pattern is not confined to a unique Swiss experiment, for throughout history that motto became reality as the gospel has been proclaimed: *post tenebra lux*, after darkness, light. When God speaks into the darkness, the light of the good news of Christ's work changes lives.

Turn with me to 1 Samuel 3 in your Bibles. This is a dark time in Israel; the period of the Judges, when Israel was attacked by enemies from without and decay was growing from within. The tabernacle is in Shiloh with aged Eli overseeing Israel's worship, while his two sons preyed upon worshipers without consequence. The men stole sacrificial meat and slept with women attending the temple. There appears to be little hope in the darkness except for one young boy, named Samuel. In chapter 2, while Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, sin with abandon, we are reminded how Samuel served the Lord. Now in chapter three the light shining in the darkness will become brighter. That light, though, is not Samuel, but God working through Samuel. READ 1 Samuel 3

## **GOD SHINES IN DARK TIMES**

1-3

### **God's people experience dark times**

We have a faulty faith in past golden ages, be they idyllic Israel living obediently to God's commands (a quick read of any section from the Old Testament will disabuse one of that notion) or a perfect New Testament church (Cornith?) or a godly Geneva in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Every age is filled with difficulty. So when we are faced with trying times and an enveloping darkness around us, we can take comfort in that this is the environment in which God's grace works.

The trouble is, darkness is troubling. As we saw last week God's blessing was about to be withdrawn from Eli's family. His refusal to deal with his two sons leaves a legacy of failure for generations to come. God has not abandoned his people, but He is leaving them to feel the weight of their sin. Notice the dark terms in which this time is described.

The times are dark because God's Word was rare

How so? They had the Law of Moses, so they knew what God expected and how to worship. The scarcity of God's Word was not just in a lack of supernatural revelation, not just in the stillness of prophecy, but in the silence of God's Word at work in the lives of people.

Last week we heard of the man of God who came to Eli with God's Word, but his rebuke did little to change the circumstances. In 2:25 Eli's reproof to his sons was left unheeded. What we heard earlier from Amos 8 is true here. God has sent a famine, not of bread but of hearing the words of the Lord.

The times are dark because God's leaders are going blind.

We are told Eli's eyes were going dim, not just as a matter of age, but of the darkness that had settled in on those who were responsible for leading God's people. Eli was blind to the sins of his sons, as he confronted them on their adultery but ignored their stealing the meats.

As we saw last week, all this is not a picture of God abandoning His people, but of the consequences when God's people do not obey. There is a loss of blessing, but God's covenant remains with His people.

A malaise descends on God's people when they are in darkness

A spiritual limpness sets in as we read of the daily events in our world. Myanmar withholds aid from their dying people; genocide continues in Dufar, the papers are filled with stories of inhumanity and degradation. Even more in our own lives, among those we love we are struck with the power of sin working in us its horrific affects. So we are left wondering – is God's Word rare in our world? Why is there so much darkness from churches.

It is all too easy to cast dispersions upon those churches in which God's Word seems to have less sway than the latest trends. We can dismiss segments of God's people where we see the centrality of preaching set aside for emotionalism. But such conclusions are dangerous, for we may feel unaffected, standing in the right and having little to confess.

It is not just the lack of God's Word being proclaimed that is the problem. The rarity of God's Word is seen, as it is not being heard, received, tended to by those who hear it from week to week. In our worship we sing God's Word, we read large portions of it, we walk through verse by verse, teach in our classes and small groups we study it.

Yet I sense a famine, a tiredness of the gospel, as though God's Word inoculated us, having little affect in our lives. It may well be my dim sightedness, my hard heartedness that causes you all to hear so little of the good news that your lives remain unaffected. I daily ask God to reveal my own sinful heart so that I can repent. I invite you to do the same, lifelong searching of your own heart if you have ceased hearing God's Word being proclaimed as you have ceased to see your own sin and need of a Savior.

The rarity of God's Word is seen in both its lack of proclamation, but also in the lack of reception. If you sense a dryness as God's Word is proclaimed, do not be too quick to assume that the only problem is the sinner standing before you.

### **God's people have hope in dark times**

But there is hope in our passage. Juxtaposed to the rarity of God's Word, God speaks, over against the darkness of Eli's eyes; the lamp is still shining in the Temple. The scene shifts to Samuel, blooming like spring flower on a dunghill.

While Eli is bedding down for the night, fumbling about in his blindness, Samuel is going to sleep in the temple, near the Ark of the Covenant. The seven-fold lamp stand, the menorah is still lit. The lamp was to remain lit through the night, so that it had not yet gone out tells us that this is in the wee hours of the morning. There is light where the remainders of God's covenant promises are housed.

As the darkness fades and the light shines, can we have confidence that everything will get better, that sin will be abated and holiness reign?

Not at all. The situation will not get *better*, that is, problems will not go away, the darkness will. But the promise of the gospel is that out of darkness will come light and that does happen. The chapters that flow will still be filled with darkness, but out of that darkness light will shine, change will occur.

There was hope and change in Geneva with the preaching of God's Word. There was also conflict and trouble. Likewise, do not be troubled when, with the proclamation of the gospel that all will, here in our family, always be smooth. There will always be darkness to be dispelled by the proclamation of the light of the gospel.

## **GOD SHINES PERSISTENTLY** 4-10

### **God persists when we are clueless**

This passage often is used to illustrate how we should listen for God's voice in our lives, to direct us to discern God's will. But don't come here first asking, "how does this apply to me?" "What does this tell me about my life?" Rather, ask, "What does this tell me about God?" What this tells me about God is that He is kind, gracious, and persistent in our lives.

Three times young Samuel hears his named called. Three times he thinks it is Eli. The characters in this story are clueless. Samuel, Lord lov'em, is a few fries short of a happy meal.

If this were a cartoon, Eli would be Homer Simpson, concerned about his own fleshly delights and incompetent to control his family. Samuel's inability to discern God's voice can be excused by v7, that he did not yet know the Lord. How similar this is to what was said of Eli's boys (2:12), but the little phrase *not yet* explains why Samuel kept waking up the old priest. But God breaks through the spiritual deafness of those who do not know him. His calling is always effective. No one is too deaf for God to make him hear, too dead to be raised to new life.

Finally, Eli, while eyes are dim and mind is numb, is aware enough to recognize what is going on. He instructs Samuel how to respond. The fourth time, God comes to Samuel there in the midst of the temple, and calls his name again. Finally, Samuel listens and responds to the One who calls.

There is a story, probably apocryphal, of Franklin Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who came down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir." It was not until the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Not quite knowing what to say, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

God speaks to us continually, by means of the Holy Spirit through His Word, and yet we hear little of what is said. We may be good at seeing how this verse applies to our spouse or our friend should take that verse to heart. All the while God is calling us and we think it is something else. But the good news in this passage is to see how persistent God is in calling. Our hard hearts are never too hard for God to break through, if He so wills.

### **God persists in calling us**

People go too quickly to the audible voice, the three-fold repetition, or the simple response and a clear word of what God wants us to know. There is much here we cannot replicate. None of us bed down for the night in God's temple, nor are we called to be God's judge, priest and prophet in ancient Israel like Samuel.

But what is applicable is the character of God, persisting in his call in our lives. Are you ready to respond to that? In the reading of God's Word and in the sermon itself, are you prayerfully receptive to hear God speak. Spurgeon expressed this well, by showing how one should pray:

"Speak, Lord! While the minister is speaking, Lord do speak. I have heard the minister's voice, and sometimes it awakens me, but I am not saved, and I never shall be, Lord, if the minister speaks alone. Speak, Lord! My mother has talked with me; my earnest teacher has sought to lead me to the Savior; but I know that the words of blessed men and women will fall to the ground if they come alone . . . Oh, let it be tonight a real work of grace in my soul! Let divine power come and operate upon me."

Be careful about such a prayer as that. For when Samuel responded to God's call, the light of the gospel dispelled the darkness by first shining down on the sinful condition of God's people at that time. We mistakenly imagine God's calling to be to warm fuzzy thoughts and dreamy sunshine.

But in order to be assured of God's grace and forgiveness, we need to wrestle with what we need to be forgiven for. Young Samuel needed to know the consequences of sin. You and I need to know that as well. When God calls us, he calls us to see the truth about our hearts and to embrace God's grace for fallen sinners.

Light will dispel darkness, but we must first know there is darkness to be dispelled.

## **GOD SHINES POWERFULLY**

3:11-4:1a

### **God is powerful over sin**

When Samuel responded to God's call, God's light illumed the dark world in which Samuel lived. The power of God's Word is seen in the denunciation of sin, made clear in the previous chapter. There is nothing new in what is said here, other than the time has come for judgment to begin.

When Samuel is called by God and shown the destructive power of sin, his first job is to deliver some bad news to Eli.

It is clear from Eli's response that he knows what is coming. He draws it out of the boy. Again, it is imperative that we are clear as to what is offensive to God. The Word of God is rare, visions infrequent when we remain silent about our need. God is powerful over sin, but we need to know what it is that we have done to offend God.

Eli's response is one of acceptance. His response demonstrates his willingness to accept God's sovereign will. What is sad for Eli is that for years he rejected God's gracious call to repent. While still a part of God's people, he is about to suffer the loss of God's blessing in his life. That he belongs to God is seen in his acceptance of God's decree.

### **God is powerful by His Word**

The story does not end there. God continues to work in and through Samuel, so that we see full-orbed growth here. Not only did the boy become a man, but God's Word grew as well.

Christian leaders love to speak of church growth, of numerical success, but here we see the all important *word growth*. We see the same pattern in Acts, as the good news of Christ death for our sins and resurrection is proclaimed, people responded. Turn to Acts 6:7 and 12:24.

On several occasions Luke records the growth with an interesting phrase – the word of God continued to increase. *Post tenebras lux* – after darkness, light. This is what we need here at Cornerstone, what we need to pray for and encourage. Are you hearing God's Word and yawning? Or do you hear the Word and are challenged to confess your failures before God and enjoy His tender embrace, calling your name.

The answer is not just multiplying the times you hear God's Word preached, it is not in some perfunctory performance of listening to words. It is hearing in faith, willing to serve, making yourself available to God.

It should not escape our attention this morning that the one in whom God's call became effective is young Samuel. For our young people here this morning, you have been raised in a home where God's Word has been a part of your life. You know your sin and what Christ has done. Repeatedly, God calls for you to respond. Yet it is too easy to push that voice to the background.

Many of you have been brought into this community through baptism, but have yet to respond to God's call by personally professing faith. It may be that, like young Samuel you do not yet know the Lord. However, as you hear the Word proclaimed each week, are you hearing God call you to serve Him? It is time you answer: Speak, Lord, for your servant hears."

Professing faith, owning the covenant your parents have made for you, is critical. Not just so that you may be admitted to the Lord's Supper or serve in some capacity here at Cornerstone. Rather, because is calling you to trust in Him and serve Him with your life.

Over the next several weeks we will be receiving new members, some of whom have come from other churches and some have grown up here and are making a profession of faith. I want to challenge the kids and young men and women here who have yet to make this profession of faith to speak with one of the elders here after the service. It is important that in the darkness of your life, the light of Christ shines. He is calling you. Will you listen?