

I've been dog-sitting all week, so I've been going for lots of walks every day. In the afternoons Ruby and I typically wander along the creek in Monarch Woods, and I watch with amusement as Ruby jumps in and out of the water, chases squirrels up trees, and watches in despair as rabbits hop away from her.

And I think it's because I've been spending more time among all these animals in the woods that I started re-reading a novel from one of my favourite childhood series, the *Redwall* books by Brian Jacques. How many of you have read anything from *Redwall*? There are twenty-two novels in the series, and they all feature anthropomorphic animals, including mice, moles, squares, hares, and badgers, who inhabit Redwall Abbey and the surrounding countryside of Mossflower Wood, and who are regularly forced to defend themselves from bands of "vermin" made up of rats, weasels, and foxes.

The books are delightful for a host of reasons. For starters the different animals all have different accents from throughout the UK, and Jacques has written those accents into their speech. For another, there are long descriptions of feasts, with tables laden with pies and scones and elderberry cordials.

But I think one of the reasons the books are so popular, especially with children, is that in many of the books the hero is a child. In the first book, *Redwall*, the hero is a young mouse named Matthias. In the following book it's Matthias' young son, Mattimeo. And in the book I'm reading, *The Long Patrol*, the hero is the rambunctious, overly-hyper young hare named Tammello De Fformelo Tussock, or, Tammo, who longs to join the band of fighting hares called The Long Patrol, but whose father thinks him too young. His mother, however, believes it the right thing for Tammo, and so, aided by an old squirrel named

Russa, she helps Tammo run away to begin his career as a fighting hare, and all manner of adventures ensue.

In our Scripture passage this morning, a young boy also finds himself living away from home at the prompting of his mother. A few weeks ago, we read the story of Hannah begging God for a son, and in her prayer, she promised that if God granted her this desire, in return she would raise the boy to be a Nazarite and would give “him to the Lord for all the days of his life.”

So, after Samuel is weaned, Hannah takes Samuel back to Shiloh to the House of the Lord and presents him to Eli, the priest. This, then, is where Samuel grows up, helping an aging Eli tend to matters of upkeep and worship and sacrifice, becoming known to all the Israelites who make their way to Shiloh to offer sacrifices.

As Samuel grows up and serves in the house of the Lord, he does so in stark contrast to Eli’s sons. Hophni and Phineas were also priests, but they were priests who abused their position. They intimidated and stole from the people who came to offer sacrifices, and they had sex with the women who served at the temple gates.

Two weeks ago we noted that in the Hebrew canon, the book of 1 Samuel comes after the book of Judges, which concludes with the line, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.” Hophni and Phineas are emblematic of this. All of Israel is running amok, running wild. People aren’t attending to the Word of God or living as God has called them to live. They’re just doing whatever they like, whatever feels good in the moment, and the land has descended into chaos. Even the House of God is not free of this corruption.

The land is in darkness.

But it’s into that darkness that God speaks.

I've heard this story of God calling Samuel many times. But not until studying the text this week did I notice this rather important line. The story reads, "One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. *The lamp of God had not yet gone out.*"

This lamp is the one Moses was commanded to make for the tabernacle. It was to be lit at all times, fueled with oil that the people brought to the priests with their sacrifices, to be a sign of God's lasting presence with the Israelites.

In our text, the lamp is flickering. Maybe that just means its close to dawn and it needs to be re-filled. But I think our narrator is telling us two things with this image. First, this is an indication of Israel's faithlessness...the oil is dwindling, the laws are not being upheld, and so the lamp is in danger of being extinguished.

And yet the lamp has not gone out. Even in the darkness, even amidst Israel's increasing faithlessness, God is still faithful. Still present. And God will speak into the darkness and do a new thing. God will raise up a new leader for Israel – not from the established line of priests, but from outside conventional authority. God will speak through a child, a child who was himself a miraculous answer to prayer, to show that God can do a new thing, a surprising thing, even when it seems that all of Israel's hope is lost.

So this text, like all of Scripture, is first and foremost about God and what God is doing. It's about, says Walter Brueggemann, "God's resolve to do a new thing."

But there are a few things about how the humans in this story respond to God's actions and God's words that are important for us to take note of.

First, we see in this text the importance of discerning what it is that God is doing in community. God speaks only to Samuel, but it's Eli who recognizes that it's the Lord who is speaking. It's Eli who assures Samuel that this is a voice to pay attention to. And later, when Samuel relates his message to Eli – a message that isn't a particularly nice one for Eli to hear – Eli recognizes the authority of God's words. Our text says that Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and so he relied on Eli to help him recognize the voice of God.

God still speaks to us today, still reveals his will, his plans, his calling on our lives, the new thing he is doing. And so it's still important that we are listening, that we are attentive, and that we are listening *in community*. When someone starts a sentence with a triumphant declaration, "The Lord spoke to me," I get a little twitchy. There are a lot of voices that speak into our lives. How do we discern whether or not what we're hearing is from God? How do we make sure we're not just using "the Lord spoke to me" as a trump card that no one can argue against?

Well one of the ways we ensure that we're really listening for God is by testing things out with other people and seeing whether others are discerning the same thing. In my own life, I've heard the voice of God speak clearly into my life twice. Both times were related to ministry callings, and both times God used my mom to confirm what I was hearing.

On the first occasion I was in university, working on a paper about rituals and worship. I was a history major at the time, planning to go into education, but as I worked on this paper I knew that *this* was what I wanted to study. So I called my parents the next day and said, "I think I'm going to change to the pre-seminary track." Now my mom worked for my home church, and the day before, the day I had felt this call to

seminary, she had received a box of Forum magazines, the magazine of Calvin Seminary. And she told me that as she flipped through a magazine, she kept thinking, “This is where Laura needs to go.” On the same day, at almost the same time, we had both had the same thought. So we paid attention to that.

Four years later, I was at a Calvin Symposium on Worship. I was in my final semester of seminary, and had started talking to some churches. A minister who also worked for the Worship Institute, Duane Kelderman, approached me in the hallway between sessions. He told me he was the interim pastor at Second CRC in Grand Haven, and he thought I would be a good fit for them and them for me. So I pulled up the website and started perusing.

Twenty minutes later I ran into my mom, who was also attending the symposium. I started telling her about this conversation, and she said, “Wait, what was the name of the church?” Turns out that she had just come from a banner-making session led by a visual artist from Second CRC in Grand Haven. Coincidence? We thought not. Half a year later I was ordained and installed beneath the banners my mom had helped to make.

God reveals many things to us, and more often than not, he does so in community, through the voices of others speaking into our lives. So as we listen for God, a big part of that listening is paying attention to what others are saying and doing, and whether it confirms what it is we’re hearing. Whether we’re discerning what we’ll study in university, whether or not to pursue a job, if it’s the right time to move, whether or not to end or begin a relationship, or how our congregations should move forward in uncertain times, it’s important that we lean on one another and bring other voices into the conversation, trusting that God will reveal his voice to us through community.

The second thing I want to note about Samuel and Eli's response to God is that they do, in fact, respond.

Samuel, a teenager, steps into this mantle that has now been thrust upon him. He takes this harsh word he has received from the Lord, and though he doesn't really want to relay it to Eli, at Eli's own encouraging, he speaks God's truth. And he keeps on speaking. God keeps revealing himself to Samuel, and Samuel continues pronouncing the Word of God to the people. That's no small job. That's a task that comes with some fear and trembling. But Samuel is obedient to this call that has now been placed on his life.

And Eli responds by relinquishing. Which is also no small thing. It's one thing to step into power when power has been given to you. It's another, perhaps more difficult thing, to give up power when the time is right to do so. But this is what Eli does. He recognizes the truth of God's word, recognizes that God is doing a new thing, recognizes his own failure in raising his sons, recognizes that the mantle has been passed from him to Samuel. And Eli says, "Let the Lord do what is good in his eyes."

Both Samuel and Eli submit to what they hear, to this new thing that God is doing. God acts, and his people respond in faith. And so something new, something good, something hopeful begins to unfold. Through Samuel God will anoint a king – also a young boy, also a surprising choice – from whose line will come one who will most fully reveal the Word of God, who will be an eternal light to a people walking in darkness. This Messiah – this young man born of a miraculous birth will respond in obedience to the call placed upon his life, and through his obedience, even unto death, God will do a new thing.

So a final question we might ask, as we seek to discern what God is saying to us as individuals or as a community, is whether what we are

pursuing, the direction we feel God is leading us...whether that looks like Jesus. For to know the Word of God is to know Christ, the crucified and resurrected one, the image of the invisible God, the one who reveals God's self to us.

So as we wonder about a career to choose, or a relationship to pursue, or a neighbourhood to move into, we might ask ourselves, "Would this job allow me to love well? Would this move help me shine the light of Christ in dark places? Would this person help me grow in relationship with God?"

Am I living with ears and heart wide open, that I might be used by God as he does a new thing, a hopeful thing?

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

Would you pray with me?

And so, Lord God, may we hear you when you call.

Give us the grace to follow you into new and surprising places.

Give us the courage to respond in obedience.

Give us the wisdom to listen and discern together.

May we be your hands and feet in the world,

poking your light into dark places,

that all the world might know you and your love.

We pray this in Jesus' name,

Amen.