



## CHILDREN'S SUNDAY (BIRTH-AGE 12)

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, July 12, 2009**

**Herbert R. Marbury, Guest Lectionary Commentator**

Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible, Vanderbilt University Divinity School,  
Nashville, TN

**Lection – 1 Samuel 3:1-10** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. (v. 2) At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; (v. 3) the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. (v. 4) Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" (v. 5) and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. (v. 6) The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." (v. 7) Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. (v. 8) The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling

the boy. (v. 9) Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. (v. 10) Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

## **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Cultures and faith communities around the world celebrate the gift that God offers to humanity through children. African American Christians are no different. In many black churches, Children’s Day is a time for recognizing the achievements of young congregants who have earned a place on the honor roll, recently graduated, or distinguished themselves by their athletic prowess or creative genius. Children’s Day is also a time for adults to offer children the space to display their gifts by leading worship. Many churches will encourage children to form a choir, serve as primary liturgists, and more on that Sunday. In these churches, children live out the biblical saying that “a child shall lead them.”<sup>1</sup>

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 1 Samuel 3:1-10**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

I remember as a young boy the annual bustle leading up to Children’s Day. The energy devoted to preparation rivaled the preparation given to any of the high holy days of the liturgical year. As kids, we planned for months in advance to conduct the perfect worship experience. I remember the children and youth director, along with mothers and fathers of the church, joining the effort to teach us the conventions of worship. It was also a day when the order of service juxtaposed the latest hip-hop with a baroque anthem and traditional liturgical dancers took notes from a teen step team. The sermon, preached by an older youth, resonated with all the cues of youth culture and held young people in rapt attention. Our children’s group, like many others, also involved children of the community whose families did not attend the church. So, on Children’s Day, both the congregation and kids leading worship reflected our neighborhood: churched and unchurched, Christian, Muslim and Hebrew Israelite. It was a marvelous exercise in interfaith fellowship because our church took seriously the challenge to “suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not for such to the Kingdom of God belong.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

I Samuel 3:1-9 inaugurates Samuel as a prophet of the Lord. What an exciting occurrence--a vision at a time when visions of the Lord were rare! One would expect such an auspicious event to be heralded by both Samuel and Eli’s celebration. But, ironically, the event passes almost unrecognized by God’s new prophet or by his ailing teacher. What happened? How could they miss God? How could Samuel mistake God’s voice for Eli’s? In verse seven, the text informs the reader that Samuel did not yet know the Lord. So, sadly, Samuel hears the voice but does not recognize his creator. In other words, in a society where children are not valued as gifts of God with their own agency and ability to hear from the Lord, why would they be taught to hear God for themselves? Both Samuel and Eli find themselves confused by the experience, because Samuel has not yet been given permission to hear God for himself.

In verse 2, we are told that Eli is ailing. With failing vision, he cannot see God as clearly as he might have during the height of his ministry. Although Eli could not see it, God had already called his student, Samuel, to lead Israel. With neither army nor political office, Samuel would join the tradition of prophets who would anoint and depose kings, such as Saul and David. Samuel's word would send Israel to war, prophesy God's vision, and admonish rulers to repent and return to the ways of the Lord. Today, black families, communities, and civic organizations find themselves plagued by ailing leadership who still have much to teach, but have not taught a younger generation to hear from the Lord for themselves. Thankfully, it took Eli only three attempts to recognize God's voice. The omniscient narrator heightens the reader's frustration by clueing the reader in to the identity of the voice before Eli identifies its source. Finally, Eli realizes the gift that God had given to Samuel.

Many black children live in a world where their gifts go unrecognized or live lives where their gifts are rejected. Black communities are replete with sad anecdotes of brilliant young kids, whose intellectual prowess surpasses fortune 500 CEOs, but who grow up to build empires in the drug trade because no one received and nurtured their gifts. Worse, when families and communities fail to recognize and cultivate their children's gifts, others may do so for their own purposes. Black communities were late in claiming hip-hop as a worthy and legitimate music expression of black youth. Within a few years of hip-hop's inception, the larger music industry exploited the creative energy of black youth for profit rather than cultivating God's gift in them. For years, the market consumed the production of images and lyrics that degraded young people, only exacerbating the pathology in black communities.

However, God has not left our youth in silence or darkness. God persisted in the darkness of Samuel's room until Samuel recognized God's voice. Just as Samuel finally recognized God's voice, God persists until we listen. God is still speaking to black children and youth and they are responding in marvelous ways.

In 1969, Weldon Irvine and Nina Simone collaborated to tell us that we must learn to teach our young that they are "Young, Gifted and Black . . . and that's a fact!" Each one is endowed with agency, a calling, and a particular connection to the Creator. Our responsibility is to teach them to be available to God, and then to receive from them the good thing that God has for humanity.

## **Celebration**

When we empower children by ensuring that they have healthcare and housing, quality education and safe environments, then they will hear a word from the Lord and heal our land! When we teach our children to be available to God, they will imagine themselves in the image of their Creator, not in the images developed by market-driven mass media. On that day, when no child is hungry or alone, naked or unloved, when each one has what she needs to respond, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening," then the blessings of the Lord will be revealed among us.

## **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include:

**Sights:** Eli lying in his room, aged, blind, and weary (v. 2); a dark room lit only by dim candle light (v. 3); a young boy, startled, running into the next room and rousing an old man (v. 4); and

**Sounds:** An old man snoring; a voice piercing the darkness; Samuel, awakened abruptly, running toward Eli's room, an annoyed Eli instructing Samuel to return to bed (vv. 4,6); and Samuel asking the Lord to speak as he listened (v. 10).

**Note**

1. Isaiah 11:6b, NRSV
2. "Luke 18:16." The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books : New Revised Standard Version. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989.