

Hearing Things  
Reading from the Old Testament: 1 Samuel 3:1-20

In 1975, at the age of 13, Doug Sweet visited the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. "He tilted his head back, gazed up at the glistening white dome and thought it was the most awesome thing he had ever seen." (Michael Phillips, Jennifer Levitz, Jim Oberman, *Wall Street Journal*, 1/10/21) His second trip there didn't go so well. Rather than looking up, this time he found himself lying face down, handcuffed, and looking at federal charges.

Ironically, he was baptized last summer in the Chesapeake Bay. His pastor says Sweet's priorities changed, and he got very committed to church. He called Sweet "a passionate 'patriot' who talked about being 'concerned for our country.'" Submerged in the waters of baptism – under arrest in our nation's Capital. Welcome to the disturbing resurgence of what is called Christian nationalism, found at the intersection of Evangelical Zeal and conspiracy driven zealotry. It is not a pretty place.

Sweet sees himself as a true believer, which is frightening when you consider what he believes and how he sees no contradiction between

his convictions and the gospel of Jesus Christ. He believes the Speaker of the House, the former Secretary of State, and other women in positions of authority drink the blood of children, disguised as pizza sauce, as part of their quest for eternal youth. He believes the Presidential election was stolen. He believes the U.S. military invaded Afghanistan to seize control of the heroin trade. Mr. Sweet thinks Democrats staged the clashes in Charlottesville. "He professes a series of beliefs about the powerful manipulating the world in ways visible only to those able to see through the deception." And he believes he is one of them. And last summer, this true believer with the self-proclaimed rare ability "to see through deception" renewed, professed, and committed his life to ... Jesus? Yet, he sees no contradiction between his conspiracy obsessions and the rabbi of Galilee, the redeemer, whose teachings speak of peacemaking and whose love knows no boundaries.

Answering the president's call to go to the Capitol building, Sweet went and once there, he says he hesitated. "He says he felt the need to go inside to share his views with Congress but wanted to consult God first. He prayed aloud: "Lord, is this the right thing to do? Is this what I

need to do?” He says he felt God’s hand on his back, pushing him forward.

“I checked with the Lord,” he says. “I checked with Him three times. I never heard a ‘No.’” But not hearing a no is certainly not the same thing as hearing a yes. Was he actually listening for a word from the Lord or being seduced by voices and values that bear no relation to the Jesus he claims to follow? Do we believe we are made in God's image as revealed in the life of Jesus, or do we assume God is made in our image and adopts our views? I would say Jesus' *no* was all around Mr. Sweet, but sometimes you have to listen with your eyes, strange as that may seem.

This week, the owner of a local pet rescue offered a rather helpful insight, sprinkled with moral clarity. She said, "Huge numbers of our population believe in a complete alternative reality. Alternate facts as it were. But just as intensely as I believe they are deluded; they think I am the one who is deluded. Maybe I am. So how can I be confident in my perception? It can be quite difficult. But I have found that in times of confusion, particularly when emotions are running high and creating tunnel vision, the presence of Nazis can be an extremely helpful

indicator. If I am attending a local demonstration or event and I see Nazis...neo-Nazis, miscellaneous-Nazis or the latest-whatever-uber-mythology-Nazis, I figure out which side they are on. And if they are on my side of the demonstration? I am on the wrong side. It is tough to argue moral equivalence when I am standing next to a Nazi. Look to my right. Is there a guy wearing a 6MWE (6 million wasn't enough) t-shirt? I am on the wrong side. Look to my left. If that guy is wearing a Camp Auschwitz t-shirt? Wrong side. Speakers referring to things Hitler got right? Wrong side. I can always ... rely on the presence of Nazis as a guiding light through a fog of disinformation."

Mr. Sweet may have felt a hand on his back, pushing him forward, but I doubt it was the hand of Jesus. Granted, there were many hands and voices pushing him forward, and the voices moving them have incredibly powerful microphones.

Most folks know that I'm a big fan of the St. Louis Cardinals. The Cards have a loyal fan base that encompasses a wide geographical area; and while I'd like to convince you that the reason for this is that they are God's anointed, the actual reason has more to do with technology. Back in the days when radio was king, St. Louis was fortunate enough

to have KMOX radio which possessed a clear-channel license and a 50-kilowatt signal. This meant that if people across a swath of states wanted to hear a baseball game, KMOX was the station and the Cardinals were the team. Today, however, a thirteen-year-old with an iPhone can set up a podcast in her bedroom that could reach millions of people across the globe. I read an article in *The Atlantic* this week about the TikTok app, a social media platform that allowed Charli D'Amelio, as a 15-year-old filming short videos of herself doing the latest dance moves, to accumulate 94-million followers - six million more than Rihanna has on Instagram or Taylor Swift has on Twitter.

Such a platform, in the hands of an enterprising angry white man with a lust for influence, someone like Alex Jones and his *Infowars*, can wreak havoc on civil society, peddling unfounded rumors, vitriolic unsubstantiated accusations, and ridiculous conspiracy theories as truth. All he has to do is push your buttons and validate the worst in you and he's got you, because, well, if he has a big enough audience and your golf buddy likes him, then it must be true, right? Then, as soon as you parrot his words in venting with a neighbor out back by the fire pit one night, complaining about the state of the world, Jones has him, too.

And if the President quotes or retweets him, then Jones has millions. It's not just the latest dance moves and cat videos that go viral.

Doug Sweet's daughter, from whom he is estranged, says she has been saddened and puzzled to see her father's views grow more extreme. She says, "I don't know this person anymore," she says. "It's almost like a lot of these middle-aged white men are afraid, I'm not really quite sure of what, but it's like they're paranoid...It's mass hysteria."

Jesus said very clearly, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?"

You will know them by their fruits. Well, what could that be? The Apostle Paul knew, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." If you don't see any of that fruit, you may want to reconsider your sources.

A common refrain of lament these days is, *I just don't know what or who to believe anymore*. To that, I say, listen to Mr. Rogers. "Look for

the helpers." You see, Mr. Rogers, a Presbyterian minister who had studied the scriptures thoroughly, knew the words of the Apostle, and so, had a clue about how to identify the Spirit's fruit. It all comes down to a simple challenge - Look for the helpers, and then join them. How do you know they are helpers? The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Yes, the helpers will be flawed people, too, but God's light can still bring their fruit to blossom, anyway.

Eli was a priest, a Levite whose vocational calling was to facilitate the worship of God's people. He had been at his work for a long, long time. Whatever idealism Eli possessed had faded through the years, crowded out by cynicism, failure, regret and the weariness that comes during a long season of apathy. Eli's biggest regret centered on what had come of his sons, Phineas and Hophni. Any joy that accompanied the notion of his sons following him into the priesthood vanished with the realization that they were using the position to take the best of the offerings presented to the Lord for themselves. In addition, they were exploiting the vulnerabilities of the distressed young women who had

journeyed to the tent of meeting to offer prayer. Imagine Eli's dismay when he confronted his sons and they just ignored him.

Describing the times, 1 Samuel records, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." The days may not have been dark, but they were certainly desultory. "At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room..." His eyes had begun to grow dim so that he could not see. Given the context, I think it might be reasonable to say this describes not only Eli's physical state, but the life of his spirit as well. And yet, we are told, "The lamp of God had not yet gone out..."

Though Eli's vision had grown dim, plagued by the cataracts of depression, self-doubt, regret, and malaise, the lamp of God had not yet gone out.

This dim, yet still-burning light would be essential to the story of Israel and remains essential to the maintenance of hope in these dimming days. Covid tired, culture war weary, citizens of a nation facing perhaps its greatest stress test since the Civil War, it could be that the description of Eli, describes us as well. Perhaps our eyesight



has grown dim, our vision fogged by anger, conflict, or despair. And yet, the lamp of God has not yet gone out.

We find this, right here in 1 Samuel. In spite of his flaws and fatigue, God could still use Eli to ensure that the darkness would not overcome the light. You see (no pun intended), Eli, perhaps initially to his chagrin, had in his charge a young boy, the child of Hannah, who had prayed that if she were blessed with a child, she would dedicate that child to the Lord. She had that child, naming him Samuel, and she did bring the boy to Eli, so that Samuel could be trained for service to the Lord.

World weary, somewhat cynical, struggling with guilt over his own record as a parent, perhaps Eli looked at Samuel as Hannah walked away and thought, *Lord, if you're listening; this is about more help than I can stand. What am I supposed to do with him?*

Not surprisingly, Eli saw Samuel as a bit of a bother, as is evidenced in our text. *Boy! Get back in the bed. You're hearing things. I didn't call for you. I can promise you that. Can't an old man get some sleep around here.* Well, it took three times, but it finally dawned on the

old priest that maybe the Lord wasn't on sabbatical after all. Yes, Eli had helped to make a mess of things, and his sons would face consequences for their misdeeds, but maybe the old priest had one more task left in him. Perhaps, he could help the young boy Samuel learn how to recognize the voice of the Lord. Eli could have dismissed Samuel as an imaginative kid who thinks there's a monster in the closet, but Eli didn't. For Eli, in spite of the fog of sleep, realized that yes, indeed, the lamp of God had not gone out.

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 did just that, and the Lord did speak to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." And Samuel, as it turns out, would play a major role as the Lord acted on his words. A king would arise, and then another, who would defeat Israel's enemies, unite the nation as one, bring the ark to Jerusalem, and bear the son who would build the Lord's temple inside Jerusalem's walls.

Samuel would become essential to the narrative, but not without Eli, who, though tired and flawed, would help Samuel recognize and answer to the voice of the Lord.

In these tense times, one might claim that the word of the Lord is rare, and our eyes are dimmed, given the current chaos. But the lamp of the Lord has not gone out. And there are voices out there that can help point us to the light. Look for the helpers. How will we recognize them? The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Look for the fruit, and wherever you see it, you'll at least know you are headed in the right direction. Amen.