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1 Samuel 3:1-14

Leader Session Guide

Focus Statement

Discerning God's voice and call in the middle of the demands of life can be a challenge. Scripture tunes our ears to discerning God's call and inspires us to follow.

Key Verse

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."
1 Samuel 3:10

Focus Image



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Who Are You Talking To?

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

The Bible is a rich and complex collection of books, many of them filled with stories about God and God's people. Before these stories were written down, they were told and retold in community—in public celebrations during times of prosperity and in hiding during times of fear. As you prepare to lead this Bible study, reflect on how stories have shaped you and informed your life. Think of those storytellers—parents, preachers, or filmmakers—who have brought stories to life for you. What might you learn from their technique, energy, and insight as you explore the stories of God's people in 1 Samuel?

Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you'll need, if any.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.
4. In this first session of the study, consider ways to acknowledge appreciation to those who are committing to be part of the conversation and outline the dates the class will meet.
5. If you are offering the study in the context of an ongoing class, make a special effort to welcome anyone new to the group.
6. This study focuses on narrative texts from Scripture. Each session will suggest reading the text in parts. You may find it helpful to print out versions of the text divided into each part. You can cut and paste sections of the text from the New Revised Standard Version online at <http://bible.oremus.org>. Also, if you know your class participants, consider ahead of time who you may want to ask to read each part.

Session Overview

The childhood stories of Samuel—which will later be paralleled in Jesus' childhood stories—emphasize the importance of being

SESSION ONE



Tip:

Review the movie quotes offered in Gather and become familiar with their sources, or identify alternative quotes you feel may be more familiar to your group.



Tip:

Consider listening to an audio reading of the assigned texts and chapters surrounding it (see the Enrichment section for a suggested schedule). NRSV audio Bibles are available on tape and CD, while other Bible versions can be heard online at www.biblegateway.com/resources/audio/.



Eli:

Eli was the priest at Shiloh (1 Samuel 1:9; 2:11) and a judge in Israel (4:18). Although he is not given the actual title, he likely held the office of high priest. His two reprobate sons bore appropriately Egyptian names, Hophni (“Tadpole”) and Phinehas (“The Nubian”). (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2)



Shiloh:

Before the establishment of the temple in Jerusalem during Solomon’s reign, Shiloh, located north of Bethel, was an important place of worship.

attuned to the voice of God. The book contrasts images of darkness and despair with God’s faithfulness. Like the people he will lead in times of transition, Samuel must learn to hear—and then to speak—in the language of God. The well-being and national identity of his people will finally depend on their ability to be *fluent* in God speech.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

First and Second Samuel tell the story of an important leadership transition for Israel and introduce the roles that will dominate Israel’s leadership going forward—the roles of prophet and king. From Moses to Samson, the last of the judges, God faithfully appointed leaders for the people. Throughout, their well-being depended on their willingness to respond to God’s faithfulness, recognizing God as their ultimate ruler and king. But they struggled, and the book of Judges concludes by saying that “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25). As 1 Samuel begins, the future doesn’t look much brighter. Their current leader, **Eli**, the priest, seems unable to control even his own two sons who are slated to become his successors. Together they embody everything that is wrong with the system: disrespect for rituals and sacrifices; exploitation of the people; abuse of power and rule by threats (1 Samuel 2:12-17); sexual misconduct and exploitation of women who participate in the worshiping community (1 Samuel 2:22-25); greed, hypocrisy, and disregard for the traditions (1 Samuel 2:27-30).

This leadership crisis is portrayed at the beginning of our text from chapter 3 through (1) the physical context of the story (at night in the temple), (2) the absence of visions and of God’s word, and (3) Eli’s own physical blindness and waning strength. Yet, in the midst of this darkness comes a ray of hope embodied in a young child whose humble origins and amazing birth story are in sharp contrast to the struggles of the nation. Samuel is the answer to a faithful woman’s prayer, and will also prove to be the answer to Israel’s own longing for change. Samuel’s ministry begins early on, as he learns to recognize God’s voice in the midst of darkness. He becomes the bearer of that word both in judgment and in promise.

LITERARY CONTEXT

In fulfillment to the vow she made when she asked God for a child (1 Samuel 1:11), Hannah brought Samuel to the house of the Lord at **Shiloh** as soon as he had been weaned. Her hope was that as a **Nazarite** he would grow up “in the presence of the LORD” (1 Samuel 2:21). Yet given the state of affairs under Eli’s

leadership, we are told Samuel can't recognize God's voice when he is called, and he does "not yet know the LORD" (1 Samuel 3:7). The heart of the problem is that the leadership had forgotten the core stories that shaped the people of Israel and set them apart. "I revealed myself to the family of your ancestor in Egypt when they were slaves to the house of Pharaoh," begins God's message to Eli in 1 Samuel 2:27. God's concern is not only about observing proper piety, but rather about recognizing and remembering the people's central relationship with the God who is their savior and provider—a central theme to this book and to all of Scripture.

The reading continues presenting Samuel's call in a powerful as well as comical way. Using a little imagination as you read today's text, you can almost hear the change in tone in Samuel's voice each time he wakes up startled by the voice, goes to Eli, and says, "Here I am, for you called." If you've ever been woken up repeatedly through the night by a child who doesn't seem to want to go to sleep, you can infuse some dynamics into Eli's, "I did not call; lie down again." The writer helps out our imagination by noting that while Samuel "ran" to Eli the first time, he only "went" to him the second and third time. Similarly, Eli's addition of "my son" on his second response can be heard through gritted teeth! Embedded in the structure of this passage is the importance of repetition for learning to hear and recognize—become *fluent* in—the language of God.

One of the advantages children seem to have over adults in learning a new language is that they love repetition. How many times have you heard children around you say, "again, again," when they are doing something new or exciting. Similarly, it is through patterns and repetition that we learn the language of God. Through repetition, Samuel learns to recognize God's voice and learns to listen to him. After the third time he is called by God in the middle of the night, he says, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

It is very important to recognize that it is Eli who finally does teach Samuel to recognize God's voice, to develop this *fluency*. Even though Eli is presented as an ineffective and even unfaithful leader, God chooses to work through him to shepherd in the needed new leadership. A key understanding of human nature for Martin Luther was the idea that Christians are at once saints and sinners—*simul justus et peccator*. This understanding is reflected in God's choice of Eli as the mentor for Samuel. While it takes a little bit for Eli to fully wake up and realize what



Nazarite:

Nazarites were individuals whose lives were consecrated to the service of God, and who made specific vows including to abstain from drinking wine and never cutting their hair (Numbers 6). Samson, whose mother was also considered unable to have children, was a Nazarite (Judges 13:2-5).



Biblical fluency vs. Biblical literacy:

Fluency in a language refers to one's ability to understand and speak a language, and it comes primarily from repeated exposure to the spoken language. While all people are fluent in a language, only a portion of the world is literate. Speaking of our familiarity with Scripture in terms of fluency reflects Paul's claim in Romans 10:17 that "faith comes from what is heard," reminds us God's Word is for all people, and recognizes the fluidity of our growing relationship to God.

is going on, he is the one who recognizes the voice of God and gives Samuel the appropriate liturgical response: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” This should give courage to us as we seek to mentor others in the faith, knowing that even in our failings we can be effective instruments of God’s work. Similarly, it invites us as people of faith to realize that those whom we look up to need not be perfect, but rather seek to remain faithful.

Even in the darkness of night, at a time without visions and void of God’s word, the writer of 1 Samuel tells us, “the lamp of God had not yet gone out.” We hear an echo of these words as the writer of the Gospel of John boldly proclaims, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5). “Scripture interprets Scripture,” goes an important Lutheran principle. In both of these texts we see the power of the light of God shining out of the darkness. It is physically illustrated in the central role Eli plays as a mentor, in spite of his shortcomings and physical blindness.

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

Movies can be modern storytelling at its best. Through the movie industry, our society dedicates vast amounts of resources to telling stories in engaging, compelling, and often even insightful ways. Some of these stories find their way into our memory, so that even a short phrase from a movie script can conjure up images and emotions in our minds. In the Focus Activity for this session, participants will be asked to identify the source of movie quotes. When we hear phrases like, “We’re not in Kansas anymore,” they open up a whole drawer of images and emotions in our minds. We recognize them easily. We know them. Their characters live in our minds. What a contrast to Samuel’s initial inability to recognize the voice of God! It is through God’s repeated call and through Eli’s own role that Samuel eventually is able to recognize God’s voice. During the session, take time to reflect together on how regular worship, Sunday school, service opportunities, and personal conversations of faith also help fill our minds with God’s word. What can we learn from storytelling—ancient and modern—about recognizing God’s voice in our lives?

Often people who are not active in church in their early adult life find themselves returning to church when their children are young. In a conversation with one such couple, the parents

indicated they were returning to church because they wanted their children to grow up “with that influence.” This statement reveals a sense that when they were children the church offered these parents something that they now desire for their children. How may God’s word be an “influence” throughout all of our lives, helping us to recognize God’s call even in the midst of darkness?

Facilitator’s Prayer

God of grace, in your faithfulness you have led your people through times of struggle and times of joy. In every generation you have raised leaders and mentors and enabled them to share your Word. May your Spirit move through my preparation and our group’s conversation, that we may discern your call in our lives. Amen.

Gather (10-15 minutes)

Check-in

Take time to greet each person and invite learners to introduce themselves to one another.

Pray

Gracious God, in your love you created humankind, and you long to be in relationship with us. May the stories of faith and struggle we find in Scripture resonate with our own stories. Open our hearts and minds to hear your call, even in the midst of darkness. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Focus Activity

Can you identify where the following statements come from and who makes them?

“We’re not in Kansas anymore.”

“What’s up, Doc?”

“To infinity and beyond.”



Tip:

If you are having the group read the assigned text for the day in parts, and have not done so already, approach individuals in the group at this time to ask them to read the various parts (see “Open Scripture” below).



Tip:

Finding one’s voice is a significant part of this study. Consider asking someone in the group to “voice” the suggested prayer or offer one of their own to begin the session.



Tip:

Review the movie quotes to make sure you are familiar with them and know their origin. The first one is spoken by Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, as she addresses Toto right after they arrive in Oz; the second one is Bugs Bunny’s standard greeting; and the third is the courageous call to action of Buzz Lightyear in *Toy Story*. If you prefer, you may select additional quotes or replace these with others you believe may be more familiar to participants.



Tip:

Before reading the movie quotes out loud, ask people in the group to close their eyes and see who can be the first one to identify where the following statements are from. Following each quote, ask them to identify where the quote is from, who makes it, what images the statement evokes.

**Tip:**

If you are having group members read the text in parts, consider coaching participants who are reading the parts of Samuel and Eli, using the notes under Literary Context above.

**Tip:**

You may wish to have three small groups or pairs take one passage each.

**Tip:**

Have copies available of Evangelical Lutheran Worship or the worship book used in your congregation. You can bookmark the page where the baptismal liturgy is found ahead of time.

Open Scripture (10-15 minutes)

Ask someone to read the text out loud for the group or identify four readers to read the parts of narrator, God, Samuel, and Eli. You may want to consider darkening the room for the reading if the space you are meeting in allows it.

Read 1 Samuel 3:1-14.

- Summarize what happened in the text.
- Which images in the text did you find funny, touching, or troubling?
- What surprised you?

Join the Conversation (25-55 minutes)

Historical Context

1. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel tell the story of the establishment of Israel's monarchy. As 1 Samuel begins, leadership is exercised by the priest Eli and his sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Read 1 Samuel 3:1-3 again.

- What words give clues to where the scene takes place?
- What do you discover about the leadership situation in Israel?
- Compare this depiction to the last verse in the book of Judges (21:25).

2. Eli and his sons had both religious and political roles, swaying significant power over the people. Read the following passages and identify some of the leadership issues raised by their behavior:

- 1 Samuel 2:12-17
- 1 Samuel 2:22-25
- 1 Samuel 2:27-30

3. Samuel lives in the temple as a result of the vow his mother made to God when praying for a child.

- Discuss the content of her vow in 1 Samuel 1:11.
- Compare her vow to the commitments made by parents and sponsors in the baptismal liturgy (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 228).

4. In 1 Samuel 3:11-14 we read God's reaction to the behavior of Eli and his sons.

- How might have Samuel, who was only a child at the time, received this message?
- How might Samuel feel about delivering this message to his mentor, Eli?
- In verse 11, God’s message to Samuel is identified as “something . . . that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.” Name some ways this phrase might capture our own disappointment with political and religious leaders who violate the trust given to them.

Literary Context

1. Small descriptive details about a story can be critical to its message. Look at 1 Samuel 3:3.

- Other than providing a factual detail, what might the phrase “the lamp of God had not yet gone out” mean?
- How does young Samuel—by his age and his humble origins—embody this hope of light in the darkness?

2. As you read 1 Samuel 3:4-8 again, have someone in the group physically enact Samuel’s movement in the text.

- How is comedy used in this scene?
- Look closely at Samuel’s and Eli’s responses each time Samuel is called. What changes do you notice? What do those changes communicate?

3. After the fourth time he is called by God in the middle of the night, Samuel says, “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10).

- What is the function of repetition in helping Samuel recognize God’s voice?
- How might this be similar to the way repetition helps us learn a new language?
- What role does repeatedly hearing God’s word through Scripture play in how we learn to recognize God’s voice (God’s language) in our daily lives?

4. The broader issues of darkness and the void of God’s voice are personalized in this child, who according to 1 Samuel 3:7 “did not yet know the LORD.”

- What does this say about Eli, his mentor?
- What are the things that may have prevented Samuel from knowing God’s voice?
- How are people who grow up in the church today prevented from knowing and recognizing God’s voice?

+ Bonus Activity:

Consider exploring the story of Samuel’s mother Hannah in depth. How was her inability to have children both personally disappointing and socially problematic? How would that be different or the same today? Given the effectiveness of her prayer, what might we learn from Hannah about prayer? Hannah is portrayed as active in determining her future and influencing the history of Israel. What other women in Scripture are portrayed in this way? Note that we will return to Hannah in session 4 of this study.

+ Bonus Activity:

Samuel’s birth story has many similarities with the stories of Jesus’ birth in the Gospel of Luke. Compare Hannah’s song of thanksgiving for the birth of her child (1 Samuel 2:1-10) to Mary’s song of praise at the announcement of Jesus’ birth (Luke 1:46-56). Also, compare the brief reference to Samuel’s and Jesus’ growing up in 1 Samuel 2:26 and Luke 2:52 respectively.

Tip:

Prepare ahead of time for the reenactment of Samuel’s midnight call in 1 Samuel 3:4-8. Consider who in the group would make a good Eli and Samuel. Decide if it would be possible to set up the space in a way that those reenacting the scene could physically lie or sit on the floor on opposite sides of the room so that the person playing Samuel can run, and then walk, each time he is called.

Tip:

Consider having a children’s book (such as Dr. Seuss’s *The Cat in the Hat*) to illustrate the power of repetition in learning.

Tip:

Point out to participants that in the English language, when we have memorized something, we say we know it “by heart.” What a beautiful way to think about how Scripture can help us know God’s story “by heart.”



Bonus Activity:

Have paper and pencils available and ask learners to write out parts of two or three phrases from the Sunday worship liturgy that come to mind for them. Have them return to their list, and next to each write a few thoughts about the meaning those phrases have for them, and how that meaning may have changed for them over the years. Have them share their insight with the class if time allows.



Tip:

As you talk about images of light and darkness in Scripture, be mindful of the troubling history of using this imagery to associate evil with darker skin tones and good with lighter skin. Such associations were not present in the original text and should not be brought to its interpretation.



Tip:

You may want to have copies of newspapers, *The Lutheran* magazine, and/or your congregation's newsletter available for people to look through as they reflect on the presence of darkness and light in our world.

Lutheran Context

1. A key understanding of human nature for Martin Luther was the idea that we are at once saints and sinners—a concept known by its Latin rendering *simul justus et peccator*.

- How is this insight reflected in God's choice of Eli to be Samuel's mentor?
- What are your expectations of those who mentor young people?
- Imagine having someone like Eli as a leader in your church. How would you feel about God using that individual as a mentor to young people?

2. At a time when “visions were not widespread,” God calls on this child not once, but three times. Finally, Eli realizes what is happening and in 1 Samuel 3:8-10 provides Samuel with the appropriate “liturgical response.”

- How do you think Eli felt when he realized it was God calling the child?
- How might Samuel have felt as he repeated the words given to him by Eli?
- Note that in repeating Eli's words, Samuel doesn't say “Lord.” Why might this be?
- In light of this story, name some ways that liturgy allows us to “borrow the words of tradition” to express and explore our faith.

3. Lutherans speak of all Scripture pointing to Christ, the living Word of God. The situation in this story takes place centuries before Jesus physically appears. In what way does this text point to Christ?

- Consider this: How is the image of light shining in darkness physically expressed in the story of Samuel's call? How is the living Word described in John 1:1-5?
- Take a moment to jot down some of the ways that “darkness” is present in our world today. Now discuss ways the light of Christ may shine in that darkness.

Devotional Context

1. Think about the way you were able to “recognize” the source of the movie quotes above (p. 5) simply by listening to a short phrase.
 - What has helped those quotes find their way into our memories and hearts?
 - Compare your ability to recognize these quotes to Samuel’s first encounter with God. What is similar or different?
 - What role does repetition—of stories and of phrases—play in our own ability to recognize God’s voice (become *fluent* in the language of God)?
 - What opportunities are offered through your congregation, and which have you found most helpful, to revisit and hear anew Scripture at different points and stages in life?
2. Often people who are not active in church in their early adult life find themselves returning to church when their children are young.
 - Looking at the Focus Image for this session, make a quick list of reasons why you think it’s important that children attend church.
 - Review that list, highlighting which of those reasons you think apply to adults as well.
3. With all his warts, God used Eli to be Samuel’s mentor.
 - Who have been your mentors?
 - Who have you been a mentor to, or who do you feel called to be a mentor to?

Wrap-up

1. If there are any questions to explore further, write them on chart paper or a whiteboard. Ask for volunteers to do further research to share with the group at the next session.
2. Say out loud to the group, “The Lord be with you,” and hear them respond, “And also with you.” Then say, “Go in peace, serve the Lord,” and encourage the response, “Thanks be to God.” Point out how the patterns of the liturgy find their way into our hearts and minds in the way we pointed out at first that movie clips can do. Invite learners to be attentive this week to the patterns in their life that help alert them to God’s presence.

+ Bonus Activity:

Ask individuals or pairs to define the term *Bible fluency* in 25 words or less. You might also ask each learner to rate his or her own level of Bible fluency on a scale of 1-10 (10 being most fluent). Remind them that they do not have to share their self-ratings with anyone else, unless they want to.

Tip:

Remind learners that they do not need to feel embarrassed about their level of fluency, and they don’t need to share their ratings (see the Bonus Activity). But remind them of the opportunities they have to become more fluent. Find ways to encourage the real desire to be more biblically fluent.

Tip:

If you are not familiar with all the learning opportunities in your congregation, you may find it helpful to explore them with your pastor, Sunday school superintendant, and/or youth director.

Tip:

Talking openly about the reasons we come to church or why others may not can be very sensitive. Be mindful of ways to create a safe and respectful environment for sharing.



Tip:

Invite someone to close with the prayer provided, offer his or her own, or invite the whole group to stand and recite together the Lord's prayer "by heart." Announce ahead of time which version of the prayer you will use.

Pray

Blessed Lord God, you have caused the holy scriptures to be written for the nourishment of your people. Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that, comforted by your promises, we may embrace and forever hold fast to the hope of eternal life, which you have given us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 72)

Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

Homework

1. Read the next session's Bible text: 1 Samuel 12:1-25.
2. Watch a movie with a child this week, preferably one of the child's favorite movies. Talk about the characters and pay attention to what excites the child and what helps him or her to remember and feel that he or she knows the characters. Act out a scene with the child pretending to be characters in the movie. Reflect on what you learn from this experience about how to tell kids the core stories of our faith and help them come to know the characters in the stories.
3. Watch *The Princess Bride* (20th Century Fox, 1987) and pay particular attention to the power of storytelling for teaching and building relationships.

Enrichment

1. First and Second Samuel are considered by scholars to be part of a larger work that encompasses 1 and 2 Kings. In this study we are focusing on some of the central themes and texts while drawing from the broader context of the books. Through the week you may want to read not only the assigned text for the next session, but larger portions of the text as well. Here is a suggested breakdown of seven daily readings:

Day 1: 1 Samuel 1:1—2:10

Day 2: 1 Samuel 2:11—3:20

Day 3: 1 Samuel 4-5

Day 4: 1 Samuel 6-7

Day 5: 1 Samuel 8

Day 6: 1 Samuel 9-10

Day 7: 1 Samuel 11

2. Reread some of your favorite Bible stories in a variety of sources—various translations, children's and study Bibles, and

so on. Imagine that you are casting a movie. Whom would you cast to play the various characters in the story? If money was no object, what would you use to create the scenery for the story? Are there parts of the story you would “flesh out”?

For Further Reading

The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God by Tex Sample (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998). Sample argues that stories carry meaning and help shape and inform people’s everyday lives. Christians, he says, need to develop a set of counter-images that can enable us to engage in a healthy critique of our culture (p. 99).

Available from augsburghfortress.org/store:

Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation by Walter Brueggemann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). Brueggemann masterfully explores the impact of stories in shaping an alternative vision of the world. He proposes that the church lives in the culture as an exile. The society does not always promote or tell *our* stories. So, like the people of Israel, we find ourselves needing to reconnect with the stories that shape us, so that they may provide an alternative vision of the world—a God-given vision.

Looking Ahead

1. Read the next session’s Bible text: 1 Samuel 12:1-25
2. Read through the Leader Guide for the next session and mark portions you wish to highlight for the group.
3. Make a checklist of any materials you’ll need to do the Bonus Activities.
4. Pray for members of your group during the week.