**3 Sermonettes: 1 Samuel 3:1-10,20; 1 Samuel 4:1b-11; 1 Samuel 5:1-7,11-12** July 30, 2017

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THREE DEVOTIONAL MEDITATIONS from 1 SAMUEL

**VII. Word from the Lord**

 Where were we? It’s tough to remember where we were back on the 2nd of July, last time we had this Bible History. Some of us weren’t here that day. Much has happened since then. Maybe you’ve been out visiting family, or on vacation. It’s tough to pick up a story line after a month.

 When we last read from First Samuel, Hannah, godly Hannah, out of thankfulness to her merciful God, left her three-year-old only-child at the temple to serve the Lord. Maybe you remember the lump in your throat, as you marveled at Hannah and wished you were capable of something like that.

 She left Samuel with the high priest named Eli. But there were problems with Eli’s family. I wonder what happened. Well, let me read it to you… ***(read the text)***.

 *1 Samuel 3:1-10,20The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions. 2One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. 3The 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. 4Then the Lord called Samuel. Samuel answered, “Here I am.” 5And he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” But Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” So he went and lay down. 6Again the Lord called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” “My son,” Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” 7Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord. The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 8The Lord called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. 9So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening”… 20And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord.*

 We aren’t really sure how old Samuel was. It seems we can think of him as middle school or high school age—but we are not sure.

 In the tabernacle, God’s house, Samuel was tending the lampstand which had been fashioned in the time of Moses. It was made of pure gold and had seven lamps. Now don’t think of them as lanterns or even candles. Those are too bright. These seven lamps were little reservoirs of olive oil with a wick. These *might* give you enough to read by, if you squinted and brought the book almost to your nose. Every evening these lamps were to be lit and kept burning until morning. This was Samuel’s night job in the tabernacle.

 The faint light of the lampstand accentuated the night. It felt dark because it was night. It felt dark because this tent was constructed first with fine linen curtains, then stronger coarse curtains, then ram skins, then covered again with another layer of animal hides. In this nearly light-proof windowless building in the middle of the night—in the middle of the silence that existed before electricity and radios and cars, in a structure set off by itself—in all that silence and darkness and loneliness with only seven small wicks burning olive oil, Samuel heard a voice. “Samuel!” Quickly, dutiful Samuel ran to his aged foster father. “Here I am.” Neither Samuel nor Eli knew what was happening. At the fourth whisper, Samuel learned that the impossible was happening. God was talking to him.

 Then he did what every child should do when his mother or father utters a word, what every one of us should do every time our heavenly Father speaks. He said, ***“Speak, for your servant is listening!”***

 Let me ask you: where do you go to hear God’s voice? The opening verse said, ***“In those days the word of the Lord was rare.”*** This has led to some confusion. Some people imagine that when times were good and Israel godly, every Israelite had a vision every night. Some think it should be so in our day. That is not true. Even under the best spiritual conditions, the Lord appeared to few people, and then only occasionally.

 Read the prophets and you will understand. One book of the Old Testament begins this way: *“In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai…”* (Hg 1:1). Even for a prophet this didn’t happen every day! When a prophet heard the word of the Lord, he got up, found a pen and circled the day on the calendar. It was a big day!

 Or think of Solomon. King Solomon built the glorious Jerusalem temple. In his entire life the Lord appeared to him precisely two times. If you want to verify that, check out 1 Kings 11:9.

 So you, O people of God, when you are in the middle of the anguish of a broken relationship, when you have no idea how you will make ends meet, when you are worried what is going to happen, when the roof leaks and the porch sags and the bills pile up, where are you going to find God’s guidance? Should you wait for the whisper in the dark?

 The Apostle Paul gives this advice to New Testament Samuels: *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”* (2 Timothy 3:15-16). The apostle Peter tells us, *“We have the word of the prophets… and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place.”* (1 Peter 1:19).

 It is pretty simple. Pray, yes. Lift up the anguish of your soul in the name of Jesus. But know that the Lord has already given you the answer. It is an answer that you can hear with your ears, hold in your hands and read with your eyes. It is called the Bible. Oh yes, we wish God would just whisper to us in the dark. That would be a whole lot easier than having to read and think about and discuss God’s word. But that is God’s appointed means.

 That is why you need to be hearing God’s Word regularly at home and every week in church.

 Here God speaks to us. And we, like Samuel, answer, ***“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”*** Amen.



**VIII. The Game We Can’t Stop Playing**

 *1 Samuel 4:1-11Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek. 2The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand of them on the battlefield. 3When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, “Why did the Lord bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the Lord’s covenant from Shiloh, so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies.” 4So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim. And Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. 5When the ark of the Lord’s covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. 6Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, “What’s all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?” When they learned that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp, 7the Philistines were afraid. “A god has come into the camp,” they said. “We’re in trouble! Nothing like this has happened before. 8Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the desert. 9Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!”*

 *10So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. 11The ark of God was captured, and Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.*

 What is the most popular game? It’s not Wildlands (that’s a digital game). Some people might guess basketball. Others, with an eye to world-wide popularity, might say soccer. But there is a more popular game. This game is so popular that even people who do not like games and sports, they play it. The great thing about this game is that you are never too old to play it. And as long as you can talk, you are not too young to play it. Not only is this game the most popular, it is also the oldest game. In fact, they played this game in the Bible. Right there in the third chapter of Genesis Adam and Eve played this game, and in our reading, too. Though you may not have guessed it yet, I am confident that you have played.

 What is the game? Just call it “The Blame Game”. Long ago, serious matches of the blame game got played out in ways we don’t do any more. Sometimes, when there was death or disease or bad harvest, a witch would be found who had brought all the problems to the community, and then they would get rid of the witch.

 Today, in America, we often play serious matches of The Blame Game with lawyers—the new witch finders. If I have a car accident, it is because the other person was driving too fast or recklessly. If my wife and I get divorced, it is the other person who has been unreasonable. We also have less serious matches of The Blame Game. If I don’t get my homework assignment prepared in time, it is because I had some important work, or problems came up—but it’s not my fault!

 Perhaps you already know that this game has very few rules. In fact, the best that I can figure is that there is only one rule. In the blame game, you can never admit that you did anything wrong. It is always somebody else’s fault. There are no other rules. You can lie, cheat, steal. If you are very serious about this game, you can even kill.

 In our reading you can watch the Israelites play The Blame Game. Israel was simply trying to defend itself against the invading Philistines. On day one of this just war, 4,000 soldiers were killed. Very reasonably, Israel’s leaders wanted to figure out the problem. They didn’t want to lose another 4,000 men the next day. So they reviewed Israelite history, the history of Moses, Joshua and the Judges. Whenever Isarel lost battles, it was because they did not have God’s favor.

 So the elders thought, “Let’s get the Ark of the Covenant, the most holy object in the Lord’s tabernacle. Let us take it into battle. It will be a great big good-luck charm. God will have to help us then.”

 They are experts in The Blame Game. They fool everyone! Eli the priest is too weak-willed to stop the sacrilege. Eli’s wicked sons are only too eager to carry the Ark to the battle lines. All Israel celebrates the coming of the Ark. Even the Philistines are convinced and they cower in fear. The Blame Game has been played out. And all Israel has followed the game’s one rule: “Do not admit that you could be responsible for your problems.”

 O Israel, as you play The Blame Game, be sure to ignore the fact that God’s priests desecrate his offerings. Ignore the fact that hundreds of thousands of God’s chosen race worship idols. Ignore the fact that you never deal with sin in your midst. Yes, Israel, be sure you blame someone, anyone, but never admit your own fault.

 But here is the problem with The Blame Game. The person who taught us to play the game is Satan. And as long as we play his game, we are losers. The reward for playing the blame game is misery on this earth and eternal torment in hell. You can fool people, but not God. Israel reaped their reward in 1 Samuel 4. The slaughter was great: thousands more died on the second day! The disgrace was complete: the Ark of the Covenant fell into pagan hands. Why will you die, O house of Israel!

 The one good thing about The Blame Game is that the Christian does not have to play The Blame Game. It is difficult, but we can choose not to play The Blame Game. When we have sinned, may today’s reading remind us to flee to God, not pointing fingers at everyone else, but without reservation admitting our sin and sinfulness and Jesus’ forgiveness. And when we make mistakes, let us speak the truth, accept responsibility and trust that our fellow Christians will deal with us in mercy, for they too are but dust of the earth.

 In the book of Joel, God tells us, *“Rend your hearts, and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity”* (2:13).

 God’s mercy and grace in Jesus Christ cannot come to us as long as we play The Blame Game. But when we stop before the cross of Christ, when we freely and fully admit our sins, God is gracious and compassionate for the sake of Jesus, the one who lived, suffered and died to free us from all blame. Amen.



**IX. For God’s Sake!**

 *1 Samuel 5:1-7,11-12After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. 2Then they carried the ark into Dagon’s temple and set it beside Dagon. 3When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord. They took Dagon and put him back in his place. 4But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord. His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. 5That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon’s temple at Ashdod step on the threshold. 6The Lord’s hand was heavy upon the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation upon them and afflicted them with tumors. 7When the men of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, “The ark of the god of Israel must not stay here with us, because his hand is heavy upon us and upon Dagon our god…”*

 *11So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and said, “Send the ark of the god of Israel away; let it go back to its own place, or it will kill us and our people.” For death had filled the city with panic; God’s hand was very heavy upon it. 12Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven.*

 How terrible when the soldiers don’t come home! They leave in defense of home and nation, and make the final sacrifice. It’s even worse when they lose their life *and* the war. What sorrow!

 Israel was a nation in mourning. Thousands slain! Much of their nation overrun. God had run out of patience with his wayward people and left them to their own devices. In God’s desire to save people, he sometimes must discipline them.

 God’s discipline, however, is often misunderstood. The Philistines, Israel’s enemies, misunderstood God’s discipline. God had abandoned his people because they had abandoned him. So the Philistines thought that when they had defeated Israel in battle, they had defeated the God of Israel.

 With this in mind, the Philistines took the ark of the covenant, the sacred chest which held two tablets from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments carved by God and carried down the mountain by Moses—the Philistines took this most holy object, and ***“they carried the ark into Dagon’s temple and set it beside Dagon [their god].”*** By placing the ark of the Lord in Dagon’s temple, they were identifying the God of Israel as defeated; a footstool, a servant of their god.

 When people of this world see God’s people in difficulty, they often misunderstand. They think our God is powerless, unable to help.

 But the Philistines’ pride would not last long. The next morning, when the priests of Dagon entered the temple, they found the statue of their god face-down before the Lord’s ark – as if Dagon were bowing down before the Lord! So they picked their carved god up and put him on his pedestal. The following morning, their god was again on the floor in obeisance to the Lord, but this time with head and hands broken off!

 In this reading God shows that he doesn’t need Israel or anyone else. You see, God is not a politician. Politicians need people. They need people’s votes. They need people’s approval. That is why politicians often say silly and foolish and contradictory things, why they change their “core beliefs”. Not God. He is constant no matter what people think or do.

 At other times the Lord was pleased to conquer and subdue the Philistines through believing men like Samuel and David. But in 1 Samuel 5, the Lord searched his chosen people Israel and found no one worthy, the Lord carried out his own ritual execution on the Philistine false god. Then, he struck the Philistine people with a plague. The Lord did not need a David or a Samuel or any other human. The Lord proved himself above all need for human praise or help.

 God will act. He prefers to act through his people, but he needs none. Which tells us two things:

 First, we must be humble. What God says goes. His way of doing things is right. His requirements are unchangeable. We cannot manipulate God into doing what we want, wheedling little concessions out of him like children who pester their parents until they get their way. We must not think of ourselves as indispensable to God’s glory.

 The second thing God’s independence, or his complete non-dependence on anyone tells us—and this is better news—is that we can be 100% sure of his promises. What he promises to do, he will. He needs none to help, and none can oppose. He acts regardless of how people kick and scream, mock and insult.

 Even through this military debacle, God was working to bring his people back to him. And Christian martyrs in ancient Rome, torn to pieces in the Coliseum, they were the victors, not the lions or gladiators. And the Christian victims of ISIS in Syria are the victors, not the murderous followers of a false god and his false prophet. And you through all the troubles and tribulations of this life, even if you never have a good day, hear a kind word, see a single personal success, God will fulfill his promises to you. And God’s greatest promise is this: *“God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* It doesn’t matter what anyone thinks of God’s plan. It doesn’t matter how anyone tries to save himself. Faith in Jesus our Savior is the only way, and it is the 100% reliable way to be saved forever.

 Why does God act? Why does God do anything? God’s acts actually are about God and his glory. There is a passage where God says, *“It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name… Then the nations will know that I am the Lord”* (Ezekiel 36:22-23). It is first and foremost about God.

 There is a lesser known psalm. I don’t know why it is lesser known because it speaks so much of Lutheran theology. It is Psalm 115. Psalm 115 begins with these words, words I read in closing this morning’s meditation on what God did while the Ark of the Covenant was in Philistine hands: *“Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness”* (1). Amen.