

1 Samuel 3 and “I, the Lord of Sea and Sky (Here I Am, Lord)”

Ellen Crawford True

June 30, 2024

### **The Call of Eli**

Today marks the beginning of a four-week worship series inspired by your four favorite hymns—sort of. These are the ones that made it through the brackets, meaning some cherished hymns lost out in the sweet 16 or the elite 8, so there’s a chance that your favorite lost out by a vote or two. That said, these four are much beloved. Today’s hymn, affectionately known as “Here I Am, Lord” has been much beloved since it was published in 1981. That’s right. 1981. Which at least in my mind should be just a few years ago, but is actually just over four decades ago. That means that when I was belting it with my youth choir or in the pews at a Montreat Youth Conference this hymn was engaging and powerful and yes, relatively new. I guess every hymn was new at some point. This hymn felt familiar right away somehow to my idealistic young self who loved imagining that even I could be part of God’s saving work in the world, long before I sensed a call to professional ministry.

Our scripture passage for this morning is one of multiple instances when a human responds to God’s call with the words, “Here I am.” Abraham responds with these words when God calls him to take his long-awaited beloved son Isaac up the mountain and sacrifice him. Abraham also utters these words when the angel cries out to him to stop him. When God calls out to Jacob in a dream, Jacob responds, “Here I am.” When God asks who should be sent to speak to the ancient Israelites, the prophet Isaiah responds, “Here I am. Send me.” When the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear God’s Son, her response is, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord.” And as we heard a few moments ago, the child Samuel responds with the

same words, even if he doesn't fully understand who is calling him at first or what that voice will ask him to say and do.

As you may recall, Samuel is Hannah's son, her long-awaited, begged-for baby boy, the child she promises to God before he is born. Once Samuel is no longer nursing, Hannah makes good on her promise and brings the child to the holy place at Shiloh, under the care and guidance of Eli, a priest. Eli's own sons have gone off the rails, disappointing Eli and enraging God. Eli's sons will pay a steep price for their astounding arrogance and greed, and Eli will pay a steep price for his enabling them. It could be argued that Eli has lost his vision in multiple ways, and yet he still plays a crucial role in helping Samuel hear God calling him. Eli has fumbled, and yet, God is not finished with him; he still has an important role to play in the larger community of faith. This story is often referred to as the call of Samuel; it could also be understood as a call story about old Eli, too. His time is nearing an end, and yet, without him, Samuel would not know that it is God who is calling in the night. It is Eli's job, aging and limited as he may be to help this child hear what God has to say.

The narrator tells us, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days and vision was not spread about," as Robert Alter's translation reads, so it seems hearing and discerning a holy word was also uncommon. It is difficult for me to imagine what Samuel's growing up looked like, away from home, dressed in a new robe made to size just for him year after year by his devoted but faraway mother. The text indicates that Samuel doesn't know the Lord just yet. God of course knows Samuel—is fond of him in fact, but the work of tending the lamp and trailing after Eli is still just work. It takes a call in the night and Eli's guidance to transform Samuel's dutiful work into a relationship with the Holy.

When I first arrived in Richmond for seminary, we played an icebreaker where we were supposed to name a biblical character we could relate to. The only one I could think of was Moses, not because I'd met God in a burning bush or been raised in a palace after floating down the Nile in a basket, but because I had a hard time even thinking of other biblical characters and my track record of choosing sleeping in over attending worship in college was not stellar. I most strongly related to Moses however because my first reaction when I sensed God calling me to go to seminary was more along the lines of "Who me?!" Yes, I had sung "Here I Am, Lord" with gusto as a high school student, but it was fun to sing and to imagine that God might be willing to use me in some small, not terribly life altering way. I don't think I really meant the "I will go" thing in any deep or profound way at that point. Honestly, I thought I'd do the whole ministry thing as a side gig, a hobby, bless my deluded heart. It took a series of other voices, Eli after Eli after Eli to help me find my way, and it still does.

God calls Samuel three times before Eli realizes what is happening. He is very patient with being woken up multiple times by his eager young acolyte. Recognizing that the boy is hearing God's voice, Eli gives Samuel a script, offering him words to help him respond: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." And with this script, Eli suggests not simply words but also an action and a posture. In other words, Eli tells Samuel what to say *and* what to do—promise to listen and then actually listen. And the listening he commends is deep listening.<sup>1</sup> This deep listening involves turning down or even tuning out all other voices and noises and absorbing what God is saying with the intention of responding faithfully and fully.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Rollefson, "Pastoral Perspective," *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2, 78.

As I mentioned, I have relied on Elis of all genders and races and ages to help me hear God's word over the years, including this past week. As we sat around the table at bible study, one of you wondered aloud what it might look like for us to greet God each morning with the script Eli offers to Samuel, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Can you imagine if we began our day, not simply as individuals but as the Body of Christ, with this kind of intention? There are so many voices, so much noise telling us who to fear and who to follow. Left to our own devices, it is quite possible that we would be tempted to listen to the loudest, most insistent voices, the ones who try to drum down or drown out all the rest. But when we gather here, when we meet together as God's always beloved and often befuddled people, we are more likely to hear something true, something holy. This happens not because the one in this pulpit has all the pretty words, but because we serve as Elis to one another, helping each other hear when God is speaking and who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do and where God is calling us to go. We help each other listen in a way that we cannot listen on our own. We remind one another that God and God alone is our beginning and our end and our everything in between. As my colleague Bruce Reyes-Chow has written:

The church can be active in many ways, but ultimately it's not the activities or the programs or even the community that makes the church worthy of our time and energy. We gather [and are gathered] together to discern the mind of Christ and the will of God and to commit ourselves to living these values in the world.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, we are Elis for one another, brought together to help each other listen for God's Word to us and God's call to us. This call is not reserved for officers or music directors or clergy

---

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Reyes-Chow, *Everything Good about God Is True*, 43.

or choirmasters or Christian educators. We are not all called to be prophets like Samuel. I do believe we are called to be Elis. I am convinced that we are in fact called to listen deeply and to help each other listen deeply to and for God's Word so that with God's help we can live God's love and justice and grace and mercy out loud out there and in here.

We will be singing the next hymn in a different way this morning. Again, it is both the wisdom of the writer of a footnote in the hymnal and the wisdom of the Elis who sat around that table with me on Wednesday that led to this experiment. I mentioned on Wednesday that there is a note below the text of "Here I Am, Lord" in our hymnal that reads:

The stanzas here need to be understood as representing the voice of God, while the refrain is the faithful human response to God's call. This becomes clearer if a leader or a small group sings the stanzas, with the congregation joining on the refrain.<sup>3</sup>

I confessed to them that I was resisting that suggestion because I love singing the whole thing. The gathered group was quick to say that this different way of singing might help us listen, might help us hear the words in a new way, and I'm guessing they are right. When I said I'd check with Jacquie, someone asked if I would be singing the God part. I laughed out loud. I am certain that God has a much lovelier singing voice than I do. And more importantly, it is good for me—and us—to be clear about whose voice is whose. So, the choir will sing God's part this morning, and we will all sing the refrain together.

And it is my hope that we will go from this place and return to this place with a renewed sense of call to be Elis for one another, to help one another listen. It is my prayer that we will find a way to open our ears and our hearts for the voice of God above every other voice. By the

---

<sup>3</sup> *Glory to God*, #69, note.

grace of God may we respond to that voice and that call with the script and the posture that Eli suggests: “Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.” And may God grant us the courage and the humility to be who God has called and shaped us to be, to speak the words that God would have us speak, to go where God leads, and to hold God’s people—all people, in other words—in our hearts, trusting that we are forever held in God’s heart ourselves.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.