

“The Embrace”

I Samuel 3:1-11, 1-18-09, Ray Larson

The name “Willow Creek” is familiar to most of us. Willow Creek is the phenomenon that has been taking place in a suburb of Chicago over the last 2 decades. It all has to do with doing church in significantly different ways. It is where the term Mega-church came from and by the standards of numbers it has been declared a resounding success. Bill Hybels is the pastor and Willow Creek Church brings in people by the thousands every Sunday. The Willow Creek model has been tried by thousands and successfully copied by a few.

Now there is an amazing thing that has been discovered. A study of Willow Creek, done with their blessing, has revealed in Hybel’s words, findings that are “earth shaking,” “ground breaking,” and “mind blowing.” They are finding out that the assumptions they used at the beginning of their ministry are no longer working.

“We will need to take out a clean sheet of paper and rethink all of our old assumptions and replace them with new insights,” says Craig Hawkins, Executive Pastor of Willow Creek and co-author of the book, *Reveal: Where Are You?* Willow Creek will have to embrace these recommendations.

It isn’t the first time God’s work has been significantly interrupted by unexpected findings. These interruptions have been going on in just about all places where the family of God is faithful to two things: the call of God and the changing nature of ministry; these two are always in need of an interface that is thought through critically.

The story of Samuel and Eli that we read today is a clear case of a surprise coming from an unexpected place, a small child. The narrative doesn’t give the details but one can just about imagine the thoughts Eli must have been struggling with, poor old guy, tired and wanting to rest his achy-breaky body. What did the kid say? Go back to bed! You are just dreaming. Out of the mouths of babes... Kids say the darndest things!

And they do say the darndest things. A new neighbor asked the little girl next door if she had any brothers and sisters. She replied, “No, I’m the lonely child.”

Here are some kid’s Proverbs: Strike while the...Bug is close. Better to be safe than...Punch a 5th grader. Don’t bite the hand that...Looks dirty. A miss is as good as a...Mr. Where there is smoke there is...pollution. And, a penny saved is...Not much.

In our story of Eli and Samuel, each of us can ask a very important question of ourselves and this story. Who am I in this story? What ever our answer, we can expect a bit of tingling in our

ears as was the case when God held court with Samuel to inform him of his duty to tell Eli the truth of his administration. "I am about to do a thing in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle."

So, here is a most unusual situation, the very young addressing the very old, the inexperienced speaking to the experienced, the new embracing the old and surprisingly, the old gracefully yielding to the new.

The first lesson is the obvious one. Evil gone unchecked has a price to pay. Eli's sons were wicked and had taken advantage of the system. They knew the power of their father's position, the coat tails of his power and how to game the system. Eli had been warned to do something about the situation but had ignored it. He went along with the status quo and didn't rock the boat, although deep down, he must surely have realized it needed to be righted.

We all know that no matter what the condition, if we have that gut feeling that something needs to be changed about our private life, our family, our job or our relationship with God, and we ignore it, we always end up paying a price. This bill collector of many faces shows up and simply says, "Pay me now or pay me later!" Later, usually means the bill will be higher.

The second lesson is a bit less obvious, we can be surprised by amazing messengers. Who would have thunk it, a small boy, naïve, innocent, inexperienced, lonely; but there he was. And there she was, Maren, our soon to be 6 year old granddaughter. I was having a phone conversation with her last week and this wasn't a boring one.

Grandpa, Mary was the mother of God, right? That's right. Mary was very young, right? How old was Mary? This one I had no trouble with, THIRTEEN. Oh, the same age as my sister, right? Yes Maren. What if an angel would have come to grandma and told her she was going to be the mother of God? That would have been very interesting Maren. How old is God? Is God older than my great grandma? Yes, God is older than dirt. What did you say grandpa? Nothing!!! God must have some strange kind of DNA to be so old. Maren, I think grandma is calling me for dinner. Goodbye.

I have no idea what the theological significance of that conversation is; is Maren Samuel and am I Eli?

Willow Creek had a prophet within their midst and didn't realize it until they engaged in some honest study and introspection. God always seems to place wisdom within the community.

Lastly, we have a beautiful lesson of grace, acceptance of responsibility, and a new day for Israel. The old embraces the new and even though Eli was favored of God he knew that God had come to call and to ignore it would be a serious flaw.

How was it that Eli could so graciously and gracefully accept the message of this little guy who was still wet behind the ears? I find two simple reasons; you may come up with different ones. I think the first reason his acceptance of the new was because it clearly came from God. How does one argue with God? I don't know how you do it but for me, I argue by trying just to ignore God. However, as I mellow and take on the sheen of age I find that to ignore God is to be very IGNORANT.

The second reason Eli embraced the new was because it made sense. It was logical. Yes it was breaking with tradition and surely against his first desires. But, he knew it was best for the community he was a leader for, Israel. If we follow the story through its succeeding chapters we see that it takes awhile to clean up the situation of neglect. But, in the long run, after the Ark of the Covenant is captured, Samuel becomes a judge, he anoints Saul as king, and David comes up to lead and the golden years of Israel return.

The seasons of discomfort that come in the communal nature of faith are many and never easy. But, God always provides voices of counsel. It might be an angel, a child, a harry man who dresses funny, a boat builder, a tree climber, a wealthy merchant, a poor beggar or a leper. God is always faithful to guide and direct the Body of Christ.

It is our job to seek out the voices and listen to them with discerning ears, maybe even ears that tingle. Then the grace and embrace of old and new will precede the kiss of righteousness.