

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
October 17, 2021 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: 1 Samuel 3:1-19

Sermon: “Hard Words”

“See I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle.”

What are the hard words that have made your ears tingle?

I want you to think about some times when you have had to share bad news – telling your family that you have cancer; telling an employee that they are being let go – telling a congregation that their building needs to be sold – telling a school class that their teacher is not coming back – telling your children we can’t afford new clothes, or special food right now - telling a lover that your relationship is over.

Sometimes we just can’t get the hard words out.

But it’s probably not news you want to send in a text, or have people hear second-hand, and so we persist. The words that come out of our mouths may not be the best words, but at least we are putting the truth out there.

There have been lots of hard words, and lots of tough announcements throughout this pandemic: numbers rising, schools being shut down, deaths in long term care. We have had to use hard words like “cancelled” “restrictions” “mandatory” “screening” “asynchronous learning” and “outbreak”. If we had known at the beginning that the initial couple of weeks closure would be extended, again and again, to activities being closed or down-sized for 18 months (or more) – those words would have been so much harder to speak.

Two years ago, our church made the decision to be an affirming ministry – so concepts like registration for worship, restricting numbers, requiring proof of vaccination are hard to swallow. Worship that does not involve hugs, choir music, children, colourful bulletins and coffee time just doesn’t feel like the affirming ministry we were hoping to build.

In our Bible story for today, we hear the first story of the prophet Samuel. This is the well known story of Samuel’s call, but today it includes the part we usually leave out – the hard words, the bad news, the heavy heart part of Samuel’s story.

You see, Samuel’s first prophecy was not a prophecy of hope, but one of judgement: Eli and his sons were being held accountable for corruption in their service at God’s sanctuary. Eli’s sons were condemned for exploiting the power of their position, and Eli himself was condemned for turning a blind eye to it. After many years of faithful service, God knew that Eli had just stopped listening. Eli was afraid to use hard words and clear

limits with his sons, he simply gave up trying to make things better. So God chose Samuel, a child serving in the temple, to be given the prophecy instead.

And the words are hard. *I am about to punish his house forever, (says God,) for the iniquity that Eli knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and Eli did not restrain them.*

There are lots of places in the Bible where God says that IF the people repent, they will be forgiven. IF they are truly sincere, God will welcome them back. IF they change their ways, there will be mercy. But this is not one of those times, according to Samuel. God says: *I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated/removed by sacrifice or offering FOREVER.*

These are hard words, for Eli and for us to hear. According to Samuel, too much harm had been done: the women who had been assaulted when they came to worship, the bribes that were extorted, the physical violence that marred the holy site at Shiloh, it had all been too much. For everyone's safety, the condemnation of Eli and his sons is final. God is making the boundary clear.

It was hard for Samuel to speak the prophecy that he was given. His mentor Eli had to draw it out of him: *Do not hide ... anything from me of all that God told you*, Eli told the boy. And when Samuel told him everything, Eli accepted the hard words as a man of faith : *"It is the Lord; let God do what seems good."*

Hard words for Samuel and Eli, and for us. Because sometimes we do need to draw clear boundaries with people we love. Sometimes we need to enter into difficult conversations, with the people we work with. I know I find it hard enough to tell someone to put on a mask, or ask someone not stand so close, or check for proof of vaccination – those kind of restricting acts go against everything I have practiced in ministry for 3 decades! And yet, these are steps I will take, these are words I will say, these are protocols I will observe, for the sake of those who are the most vulnerable.

Jesus was not without his own hard conversations. Jesus' solidarity with the poor and those whom society had excluded meant he was often in conflict with the respectable people from his own community. As Jesus' followers, it should be a regular part of our call, to bear witness in the midst of resistance or conflict. And yet it is hard for us to take a stand.

When we do take a stand, we often become the recipient of those hard words: "The church is too political" we are told. "That's not how the real world works."

And yet it seems clear that what we have now is not working very well either. We live in the midst of a climate in crisis. 1.3 million Canadian children are living in poverty, and they are disproportionately represented by racialized children, and children raised by single mothers. 960 million people around the world go to bed hungry every night. The pandemic has pushed even more people into crisis. While we in Canada are

contemplating third shots, in many low income nations, just 2.5% of the population have received their first vaccination against COVID 19.

These are hard words to hear. But it is only in hearing the hard words, that we can make a difference.

In the story of the prophet Samuel, the sharing of those hard words had a profound impact on the nation. The verses in the third chapter continue: *As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. ²¹The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.*

Samuel's prophecy, his hard words to Eli, they fulfilled God's intention for the holy site. When the dust settled, it was time to rebuild. A new vision was born, the holy sites were safe and welcoming, especially for the poor and disenfranchised. Widows and orphans became the priority for the care of the community, instead of just receiving the leftovers.

That's another part of the story that we rarely hear, the story of progress and healing and re-alignment with God's intention for the people of faith. Yes, there was conflict after the hard words were spoken. But even the worst conflict gave way to healing because there was a better understanding of what God wanted from them.

This week marks a couple of dates to which we, as the church, need to pay attention: World Food Day addresses the imbalance of food security in our world. The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty invites us to imagine guaranteed liveable income support for everyone. I don't know why those are hard words for us to hear, I don't know why it is hard for a preacher to be political in the pulpit. From the call of the gospel these should be words of hope and invitation and faith, not words of conflict.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life-long friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, described prayer and "righteous action" (or justice work) as a necessary creative tension. *"Righteous action...among people, saves prayer from becoming an escape into self-satisfied piety. Prayer saves righteous action...from self-righteousness."* Action saves prayer from hypocrisy; prayer saves action from fanaticism. Action counters pessimism, while prayer keeps us from resignation. *"Action keeps prayer in the realm of reality; while prayer keeps action within the realm of truth."* (Eberhard Bethge, *Prayer and Righteous Action in the Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Christian Journals, 1979), 26–27).

Those should not be hard words for us to hear. We already know that tension to keep a good balance between worship and work, it is everywhere in the life of the church. But sometimes we need our work and our worship to involve some hard words, so that we can reclaim a better way to be the church in the world.

May God give us the courage of Samuel to let God's vision pave the way forward, Amen

