

This week we celebrate Thanksgiving.  
And each Thanksgiving we remember the Pilgrims who were searching for religious freedom.  
By definition, a pilgrim is one who is on a spiritual quest.  
And in some ways, the people of Israel were pilgrims and so are we.

So let me ask you today, "What kind of pilgrimage are you on?  
We are all traveling somewhere we don't have to get on an airplane to go someplace.  
We are moving from where we are, to where we will be in the future.

So where are you going?  
What are your passions? What are the things you live for?  
Where will your current path take you?

Because deep down, we know that not all paths lead to life.  
Some are deeply selfish. Some are life-giving.  
Some are about us, and some are ultimately about giving God the glory.

This morning we turn to Chapter 10 in *The Story*, and we meet a woman named Hannah.  
Hannah is living for God. She's a faithful woman.  
She's married, and she so desperately wants to have children,  
and so she cries out to God, asking "please, let me have a child."

It was a prayer, that was even too deep for words,  
a pouring out of her soul, before the Lord.  
Maybe in different circumstances you also, have poured out your soul before the Lord.

Well when Eli, the priest at this holy place, saw her praying  
he didn't realize at first that she was praying because her lips were moving, but she was  
praying silently.

After she explained what was happening, that she was pouring out her soul to the Lord, he  
comforted her, and counseled her, and prayed for her. To make a long story short, she went  
home and became pregnant, and had a boy. And she named him Samuel, which means, "God  
has heard us"

In fact, Hannah is such a faithful woman, that the path she is on,  
and the path she wants her son to be on, is the path of God.

Samuel grows up and becomes this great priest and prophet and judge, the last of the judges  
of Israel. And Samuel led the transition from the time of judges to the time of kings.

Samuel's life isn't going to be easy. Following God, often is not easy.  
 And Samuel's life becomes a perfect case in point.  
 His life becomes very challenging because he is taking this road of obedience, this pilgrimage with God. Because as a prophet, he is a messenger from God,

and he has to challenge people and tell them things they don't want to hear.  
 He says, "you're living for the world and not for God."

You want to have a king, like all the other nations around you,  
 you want what your neighbors have. You want to fit in, instead of letting God be your king.  
 Because the Lord not only has been your king. He **is** your King, and He is faithful.  
 Put your trust in Him, and be obedient to His Word, and humble yourselves before this Holy God. That's the very challenging message that Samuel has to proclaim to the Israelites.  
 They don't want to hear it, and it can't be easy for Samuel to say it.  
 But he does, because he's on this pilgrimage with God.

That's the road, where God brings His light, and with his light, comes God's presence and God's power.

Samuel lived the life for which he was created.  
 And so my question for you today, is "Are you?"

Are you living your life for God, and for what God created you to do, and to be, and to carry out? And I'm not talking so much about your career, although that might be part of it, I'm talking about where your heart is.  
 I'm talking about what you live for, the kind of pilgrimage you are on.  
 Because when we live or lives for God, it doesn't necessarily fit in with what the world will praise.

The challenging thing for any Christian, is to be torn between the things in this world that feed our ego, and the things in this world that are focused on the good of others.  
 And like we see over and over again with the people of Israel, they often tried to blend together the path of God and the path of the world and synthesize them.

It was as if they were saying, "We can be just like our neighbors six days a week and then on the seventh day, we'll worship God."

How did that work out for them?

"You can't do that" God says, "because you won't be able to give me your whole heart."

Jesus put it this way,  
 "These people, they honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."  
 They say the right things, they say they I believe in God. But they don't live that way.

They don't live with their hearts wide open to me.  
 They don't live with their hearts all in.  
 They are living for the world.

Just this week at church, we received a magazine in the mail, a magazine that describes itself as  
 "The one and only high end magazine that features your friends and neighbors from  
 front to back!"

It's what you would call a "lifestyle magazine."  
 Now I'm used to seeing all kinds of "Home Improvement" advertisements from companies that  
 would like your business. And I understand, you have to get your name out there to find  
 customers.

But what shocked me about this Lifestyle Magazine was a page inside,  
 with a profile on the publishers and the staff that produce the magazine.

The profile was in a Q & A format, and the very first question, was: "What are you coveting this  
 Christmas?"

Can you believe that?  
 I suppose the next question could have been, "What are you lusting after this Christmas?"

Seriously though, isn't that quite a reflection on the culture we live in, right here in this  
 community?

Now on the one hand, we can push this off, and say, that's just the "Desperate Housewives"  
 crowd, but I want you to stop and think for a minute,  
 and ask yourself if any of the advertisements you see this time of year:  
 advertisements for new clothes, or the newest phones, or new cars (the ones with the bow on  
 top), or new flat screen TV's, or new things for your home, or things you've seen your  
 neighbors adding to their homes – do any of those things, leave you feeling just a little  
 dissatisfied with what you currently have?

That's what the best ads do?  
 If we see enough of them they'll start to have an effect on us.

How else do you think the generations that followed Joshua,  
 came to do, "whatever they thought was right in their own eyes"?  
 They were shaped, by the culture around them.

They forgot who the Lord was, because they were spending six days a week being shaped by  
 their neighbors and influenced by the culture around them.

This week, I don't know how many of you read some of the other chapters in 1st Samuel,

but if you did, you would have read more about Eli's sons.

Here Eli was a priest at the Holy Place called Shiloh.

And you would think his sons, would see his faithfulness, and want to follow in his footsteps.

But in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel, chapter 2, it says:

"Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD."

One of the things they would do, was to take the offerings people brought to the temple, sometimes by force!

Can you imagine if our ushers did that as you arrived here on Sunday morning?

And then listen to this:

"Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.

<sup>23</sup> So he said to them, "Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours.

<sup>24</sup> No, my sons; the report I hear spreading among the LORD's people is not good. <sup>25</sup> If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the LORD, who will intercede for them?"

So with Eli's sons, it wasn't just their materialism, their love of money and personal comforts. It was everything about them, it was what they worshipped.

It was their business ethics, how they treated other people. Their neglect of the poor.

And as if to illustrate the height of their depravity it was also their sexual ethics how sex was not honored in the context of marriage.

We see plenty of that in our community too.

But let me ask you, "How did Eli's sons get to that point?

How did their consciences get so calloused?

How did they get so far from God's purpose for their lives?

Remember what we said a few weeks ago?

Time and time again, the people of Israel turned against God, when they forgot the Lord, and everything God had done for them.

And that can happen to us as well.

Our memories of what God has done for us, can be awfully short.

Our thankfulness, and our desire to live for God can easily be drowned out, when our thoughts are focused elsewhere, when we take God for granted.

Into this story of Eli's sons, comes the story of Samuel, the son of Hannah, that faithful woman of God who poured out her soul to the Lord.

Hannah's heart was wide open to God.  
She was the very picture of what it means to  
"Love God with all your heart, and all your soul, and with all your strength  
God heard her prayer, and God blessed her.

And in her son Samuel, we see a new chapter in the history of Israel.

The story of Samuel begins when he was a boy.

And I want everyone here this morning who is under the age of 18 to listen very closely to this:  
(and if you are over 18, you can listen in too)

You are already on a pilgrimage.  
You are on a journey, to find your path in life.

And won't hear this anywhere else:

- Not in most schools
- not in popular songs, or on TV , or in movies
- not anywhere in our popular culture
- and you won't hear it if you aren't listening

But this is the truth: "God is calling you."  
God has uniquely made you.  
No one else in this world is exactly like you.

And God has given you gifts and talents, and not so that you can just go out there  
and be like everyone else.  
God is calling you for a holy purpose.

And whether you end up using your gifts in engineering, or teaching,  
or in medicine, or music, or in social work, or any other field  
it will make all the difference, if your heart is open to God. Like Hannah or Samuel.

Did you know there is a difference between a doctor who is living for this world,  
and a doctor who is living for God?

Did you know there is a difference between a lawyer who is living for this world,  
and a lawyer who is living for God?

I could tell you stories about people I know in both of those fields,  
who could tell you in some very moving ways,  
that life is not about money, life is not about power or control,  
life is not about having other people praise us.

Life, rather, is found in only one place.

Life is found in knowing Jesus, in making Jesus the center of our lives, and worshipping Jesus as our Lord and King.

Yes, we are sinful and flawed,

yet, in Jesus, we are more loved and accepted, than we ever dared hope.

God's love, and mercy, and forgiveness changes everything.

Like, Hannah and Samuel, our hearts will be open to God.

We will hear God's call.

And out of our love for God,

we will love and serve everyone we meet. Amen.