

### **Listening to our privilege**

This Bible story of the boy Samuel hearing God’s voice is one that lives in the repertoire of anyone who has grown up on a diet of Sunday School stories. Before this episode about Samuel we hear about how his mother Hannah prayed to get pregnant and when her prayer was finally answered she dedicated her child to God’s service in the temple under the guidance of the elderly priest Eli. She used to sow garments for him and visit him once a year at the temple in Shiloh.

Samuel’s call story has fed Christian ideas of God fulfilling promises, of the importance of mentoring in faith, of God revealing godself to people – even children! It has supported the idea of a god-given individual identity and purpose for those who dedicate themselves to God’s service and who listen carefully to God’s call. I don’t dispute any of those Sunday School applications of this story. The Bible is like that, full of possible readings.

Yet, it is always fascinating to come back to Sunday School stories with adult ways of seeing things and with a pulse on our contemporary context. As a stand-alone, this bit of the book of I Samuel is indeed quite lovely. But read as a whole, and in the context of the Hebrew story as recorded in scripture, Samuel I and II are anything but lovely and they are most definitely not rated PG! They are much closer to a violent episode of “Game of Thrones” than to an inspirational children’s story. The Bible is like that, full of possible readings and complications.

For example, if you were to revisit the part I just reviewed, you’d find out that it was the practice at the time to offer God burnt animal sacrifices and that Hannah was one of two wives of her husband Elkanah, in a kind of “biblical worship” and “biblical marriage” that we no longer value.

You’d read in I Samuel 2 that when she found out she would finally have a son, Hannah sang a song that is remarkably similar to Mary’s revolutionary song which we just heard about during Advent. Or more likely, Mary sang a song remarkably similar to Hannah’s. Here’s an excerpt.

‘My heart exults in the Lord;  
my strength is exalted in my God...

The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble gird on strength.  
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil...

Does that sound familiar? This is an example of what seems to be an enduring understanding of “biblical justice:” a faith in a God who is interested in the lives of the poor and marginalized. (Nowadays we’re not quite as keen to hold on to the idea of a God who might cause people’s death – but I’m getting ahead of myself in the story.)

If you looked more closely, you’d also find that when Hannah was praying desperately in the temple, the priest Eli could not tell if she was a woman who was praying or one who was in a drunken stupor. That’s an important distinction for a priest, because Eli trained his sons Hophni and Phinehas to help in the temple. But it turns out that they were scoundrels, corrupt. (This might also explain why people don’t name their kids Hophni and Phinehas even though they are “biblical names.”) These guys were so entitled they would lay with some of the women who came to the temple – we’re not told whether the women agreed to this or not – but knowing the world of scoundrels, it was likely a classic case of #metoo.<sup>1</sup>

Anyway, besides taking advantage of women, Eli’s scoundrel sons would also skim the best part of God’s animal sacrifices and keep it for their own consumption. Eli couldn’t control them, in a classic case of “I just don’t know what to do with those boys!” He was warned repeatedly that God was not at all pleased with their behavior. Nothing really changed and as the story unfolds they all die horrible deaths – just like the bad guys in the movies or in any good morality tale such as this one.

Incidentally, Samuel’s sons eventually turn out just the same. Talk about generational brokenness and trauma! (This is an indictment on “biblical nepotism.”)

If you continue to read through the books of Samuel, you’ll see that Samuel’s life was that of a prophet – that is to say, a spokesperson for God – and you’ll learn of his repeated attempts to straighten out the corrupt system he inherited (including what turned out to be a misguided plan of setting up kings for the Hebrew people). Unfortunately, Samuel helped to plant some of the seeds of Empire that are still bearing fruit. Nonetheless Samuel remains as one of the Bible’s key characters.

So what we have here with Samuel is a personal call from God translated into a role within a system – hold on to that thought.

Oh, did I mention that “God’s people” at that point in history were living on territory they had acquired through conquest?<sup>2</sup> After their slavery in Egypt, Joshua had brought them out of the dessert, they battled with everyone who was already on the land – sound familiar? – lived under several “judges” and now it’s Samuel’s turn to take over the trajectory. Like I said, it’s a very complicated bit of scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> (A white male scholar proposes that there may have been some Caananite fertility rites going on at the time at the temple. While there is a fascinating aspect to that possibility, it feels awfully close to “the heathen women might have been asking for it.”)

<sup>2</sup> A responder to this sermon made a fair point that the narrative of “conquest” is largely legend and not necessarily historical fact. Again, proving the point that biblical interpretation is multi-layered.

So you see, back there in 1200-ish BCE, little Samuel, through no fault of his own, found himself immersed in a pretty dysfunctional system.

Here's another part we leave out of the PG version: One of the little boy Samuel's tasks that night when he heard God speaking was to tell Eli that he and his sons were doomed, they were all going to die. I can see why we leave it out! But maybe we shouldn't. Though we (most of us) don't currently believe that God utters death threats, surely knowing that God sometimes has very difficult things for us to hear should be part of a healthy spirituality.

Why am I telling us about this?

For one thing, it is an invitation to hear our Bible stories again and again and not presume we know what they might have to say. In fact, they might be saying different things at different times. (For example, because of the week we've had in the news, did you hear the echoes of racism in the John passage we just read? "What good can come from Nazareth?" "Why do people want to immigrate from those \*beep\* countries?"<sup>3</sup>) We almost inevitably read the Bible from our context and from our values.

So if God has some hard things to say, what might those things be for us?

**I want to propose that in our context God wants us to hear that we have a responsibility towards making amends with Canada's indigenous peoples.** This is something that we here at TUMC have already picked up on through the movement of the Spirit who calls us to be peacemakers and justice seekers. Peacemaking in our time in Canada involves not turning a blind eye to the systemic injustice towards indigenous peoples.

We are people privileged with resources like education, money, time to reflect, and a community that supports each other. Like Samuel, we personally have not necessarily been a part of the generations of privileged or corrupt people who have created the mess. Like Samuel we're caught up in it, whether we want to be or not. Like Samuel, we need to be on guard that we break the cycle of generations who have not walked in God's ways of justice, because we might end up repeating their mistakes.

But where do we begin? We begin as Samuel did, by learning to listen and being humble – not thinking we know it all already.

We also ground ourselves in a deep knowledge that God forms our inner being, and that the outer things and circumstances can change. Maybe they need to change.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/trump-shithole-remarks-spur-international-anger-180112084723204.html>

If you're like me it's a hard thing to admit that I live a life of privilege. But just the fact that we live in Toronto Canada puts us at an advantage over other people in the world. It's not an accusation, it's an observation.

Those of us with white heritage and white values in a white system are still at an unfair advantage, maybe not as individuals but at the very least as part of a system because what we value is the same as what the culture around us values. This really is the hard part. We may need to question things that we think are true with a capital "T", things like how we regard property, our ideas about individuality and independence, our concepts about work and economy, our relationship with the planet we live on.

Reina Neufeldt a professor at Conrad Grebel University College has been researching how the things we assume without question, our values can often get in the way of peacemaking.<sup>4</sup> This happens especially when we think we know better than other people. We need to reflect seriously on our motivations and intentions in order to truly build peace.

Regarding privilege, If God knows us and knit us together, God's Spirit will assist us in this task. Steve Heinrichs, the author of a Mennonite Church Canada sponsored booklet called *Paths for Peacemaking with Host Peoples* says: "Don't feel guilty. You didn't ask to be born into a colonial state (and church) that dispossessed Indigenous peoples for settler well-being. Feel responsible for bearing your piece of the burden."

In urging us to be patient, Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of Canada's Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission reminds us that "if it took seven generations to mess things up this bad, it will take at least seven do mend it." Let us then be a part of the mending.

So we must listen carefully for when our privilege is coming into play. But as good western protestants we<sup>5</sup> always want to "do" something. Listening doesn't feel like we're doing anything, right?

So I do have a few resources to point to. In *Paths for Peacemaking with Host Peoples*<sup>6</sup>, there are many suggestions of what to "do" divided into the following categories: The Path of Learning and Unlearning, The Path of Relationship, The Path of Art Song and Celebration, the Path of Justice and the Path of Worship.

Under the learning and unlearning category we might begin with self-reflection, learning about and talking honestly about the concept of privilege and how that

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent analysis on the influence of values in peacemaking see: When Good Intentions are not enough: Confronting Ethical Challenges in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation. <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/events/benjamin-ebby-lecture-reina-neufeldt>

<sup>5</sup> (Comment on using "we" – there is diversity here, but I'm speaking to our culture)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/21590/2015\\_Paths\\_for\\_Peacemaking\\_Booklet\\_Ed4\\_Final\\_NOBLEEDS.pdf](https://www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/21590/2015_Paths_for_Peacemaking_Booklet_Ed4_Final_NOBLEEDS.pdf)

plays out. I also have some small reprints of an article from *Geez Magazine* called "Some Principles for White Anti-Racist Work" by Tammerie Day which you might find helpful. Let me know if you'd like more. (See attached copy of the article, used with permission)

How is God calling out to us in the night?

As we reviewed the story of Samuel's call to a difficult task, I propose that we take a page out of Samuel's book and we listen for God calling in the voices of Indigenous peoples.

Let us lay aside ideas of what we think we already know and what we think we must "do" and be humble enough to say "Speak, for your servant is listening."

# SOME PRINCIPLES FOR WHITE ANTI-RACIST WORK

by Tammerie Day

*Those of us who are white sometimes try to change what we're doing without changing our being, and we wonder why that doesn't work so well. Doing anti-racist work changes how and who we are as white folks, especially if we attend to what we know and how we know it. Knowing is often the (unattended) transit point toward transformation. Here, then, are a few principles for white anti-racist being, knowing, and doing, distilled from reflections on the work of anti-racist communities.*



**1. Work from clearly identified social locations, stances and commitments.** You have a race, ethnicity, gender identity, economic class, sexual orientation, age, ability status, religion (or not), geographic location, education level. Know what difference these make to your experience of empowerment or disempowerment. Then figure out where you stand with that knowing: Who do you stand with? What are you standing for? Where are you committed to making life more abundantly possible?



**2. Listen. And learn.** Fast from speaking; practice intentional followership.



**3. Re-examine white histories, enculturations, worldviews.** See the good (white folks throughout history who've worked against racist oppression and white privilege), the bad (our history of exploitation, expropriation, expulsion, extermination, execution), and the ugly (minds stuck in the sands of the past). Examine the many facets of what it means to be white, and how we got this way.



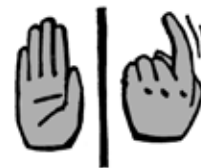
**4. Appreciate, don't appropriate.** Appreciation explores and credits the authentic expression of others' gifts, beauty and wisdom. Appropriation takes the cultural and material resources of others and exploits them for one's own gain.



**5. Be responsive, responsible and open to transformation.** If you're called, respond. We may not be responsible for history, but we must be responsible to it. There's no way to decide in advance about every change: your stance is more important than being right, sure or perfect. Be open.



**6. Embed work in grassroots communities' hopes and prayers.** The transformations that rehumanize you come through local, face-to-face relationships in your base community, where you work, dream, hope and pray together. The renewal of your soul is not only a spiritual challenge: it's community work.



**7. Ground work in just relationships.** Be accountable. Just relationships are accountable relationships: white people need to be accountable to people of colour and to anti-racist white people for our walk and our work. This means acknowledging both the veto power and the go power of our accountability partners: when they say no, we stop. When they say go, we go.



**8. Focus your work on producing concrete changes** that make a difference in the quality of people's daily lives: your own, and those of people in your community and the communities with which you are allied. 'Nuff said.

ILLUSTRATIONS: DARRYL BROWN



### 9. Think and work intersectionally, in power-aware ways.

No one is just white. We may also be male or female or genderqueer, rich or poor or in-between, gay or not so gay, of any and all ages and stages ... and so on. It's important to understand the variations of experience and empowerment (or disempowerment) that arise in our lives from the intersections of these characteristics, and how each presents a connection point for coalition and solidarity.



### 10. Embrace partiality.

This principle does double duty: first, embrace partiality in the sense of being partial to the well-being of people of colour. In looking

at experiences, decisions, behaviours, work, resources, budgets, ask "Who benefits?" and if the answer is not people of colour, reconsider. Second, embrace partiality as a principled way of knowing: our knowing is always incomplete. As Otto Maduro points out in *Mapas para la Fiesta* (Maps for the Feast), our knowing and our knowledges are fragmentary, provisional and partisan, and should be considered conjectural. Nothing scary here; just a life-giving way of dealing with reality.



### 11. Work locally with global awareness.

Racism and white privilege are global issues, and we in North America have certainly exported some of our worst thinking and behaviours. Understand how racism and capitalism intertwine to justify ongoing economic and social oppressions, but don't get stuck in analysis paralysis.

Work locally, where you can have greatest impact, be accountable, transform and be transformed.



### 12. Decolonize the white heart, mind and soul.

Can a heart, mind and soul be white? Can that heart, mind and soul be occupied territory? Become intentional about your allegiances, conscious of what forms you, clear about your true source of worth. Reject being owned by things or systems. Freedom to love is an everyday project.

*Tammerie Day is the author of Constructing Solidarity, theo-ethics for white people working against racism and white supremacy, as well as a chapter in the just-released Trouble the Water: A Christian Resource for the Work of Justice. For more on her work with communities resisting racism, you can reach her at tammerie@gmail.com.*

### A note from the editor:

*I wonder how many readers will recall that we printed this story six years ago? When assembling this issue on the theme of exodus, and looking at the work that needs to be done by privileged white folks in particular, (for example, I need to make visible my "exodus" from my compliance with white-supremacist regimes), this article seemed as relevant as ever. The Black Lives Matter movement, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, the heightened need to address our colonial legacy and neo-colonial habits – with these in mind, we reprint this story one more time with feeling. Do you recall this story? Do you have advice or feedback for us? Let us know: editor@geezmagazine.org. – Aiden Enns*