

Trinity 2 (EP-3) (2018)

I want to speak to you this morning on the subject of “**God at work in the worst of times**”.

First, though, I want to invite you to project yourself back to around 1400 BC . . . the period of the Judges . . . the world of today’s Old Testament lesson.

Picture yourself writing a friend. You have pen in, and you are looking for a way to begin that letter. Finally, after some thought, you write: **No good news here.**

Sounds severe, but it really was so.

For you see, a state of lawlessness existed in Israel in those days.

“If it feels good, do it.” “If it works, it must be alright.” If you can get away with it, go for it.” Sounds a lot like our own day, doesn’t it?

Judges 21:25 tells us everything we need to know about this period:

“In those days *there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.*”

God was *supposed* to be their King, but they had dethroned Him and enthroned “self”.

As a result, things were about as bad as they could get. Violence, discord and every evil way was the order of the day.

But, what else was going on in Israel in those days?

Not surprisingly, religion was at a low ebb. The religious establishment had lost credibility with the people.

One character we meet in today's reading is an elderly priest by the name of Eli. He was in charge of the worship at the Tabernacle in Shiloh.

During the days of King David, the centre of Israel's worship would get moved to Jerusalem. But not yet. Shiloh was where you went to do business with God in this period.

But, Eli was more than a priest. He was one of those Judges from which this period gets its name. A Judge in those days was not someone who heard cases in a court of law, but one who led the nation, especially in times of crisis.

Eli himself seems to have been a good man, but his sons **Hophni** and **Phinehas** were another matter.

They were greedy and stole as much as they could of the meat brought for sacrifice to the Tabernacle.

If anyone did not hand over willingly what they asked for, they would threaten them and take it by force. They were nothing more than bully boys.

But they had other faults as well. They would solicit and make lewd comments to women at the very door of the tabernacle.

Everyone knew what they were up to, but it didn't matter. They were absolutely shameless.

O yes, on occasion, aged Eli would give them a mild rebuke, but it made no difference. They carried on just the same. They didn't fear God. Why should they fear their dad?

These two boys were scoundrels of the first order. The tragedy is that Eli did nothing to correct the situation. He tolerated it. He did not remove them.

In the city in which I grew up, there was an incident at the First Baptist Church. The minister at the time, a Mr. Craig, a married man, had some ladies – members of the congregation – he was seeing on the side.

Well, one found out about the others and was highly indignant and went and reported the matter to the Board of Deacons.

Well, Mr Craig was out of the pulpit by the next Sunday.

But, let's suppose the powers-that-be had done nothing. Or, if they had just told him: "Now, now, preacher, don't do that" and he had continued on?

Well, you know what would have happened. The venerable First Baptist Church, located as it was, across from the state capitol, would have lost credibility in the community.

It would have lost its moral authority. It would have been a laughing stock.

Well, that is just what had happened in Israel as a result of the escapades of Hophni and Phinehas.

Would you go to these two priests for spiritual counsel and direction? Would you expect to hear the Word of the Lord coming from their lips?

I doubt it. They were a disgrace to their office, and the whole nation was suffering because of them. Religion was at a low ebb.

But, it gets worse. All this is going on, and God Himself seems nowhere to be found. We read:

“The word of the LORD was precious [scarce] in those days; there was no open vision.”

Language found in the OT book of Amos would equally apply to this period: **“There was a famine in the land.”**

This famine was not a famine of food, but of the word of the Lord.

Again, I think we can see parallels to our own day.

We have churches on every corner, but the word of God is not going forth in all of them.

In many, entertainment and self-affirmation has replaced a thoughtful reading and exposition of the Word of God.

In some, if you go to their services, God is talked about, but is in fact an interloper. Rather, *It's all about me! My this and my that.*

Ravi Zacharias, perhaps the greatest Christian apologist of our day, recently said that people who regular attend these types of churches will not be able to stand up to contemporary challenges, in particular the challenge of Islam.”

Why? Well because they have no sure foundation. Everything is shifting with the culture.

Lights, drums, repetitive choruses may create a mood . . .

A coffee bar may evoke conversation . . .

A positive, fluffy, theological vaporous message from the pulpit may bring forth some good vibes . . .

But what about the Word of the Lord?

What about the famine in the land?

No, good news here . . . just as there was no good news in Israel in the days of the Judges.

But, where is God? Is He oblivious to what was going on on Planet Earth?

If He isn't, why doesn't He do something about it?

We find our answer – at least partially – in Chapter 3 of 1 Samuel.

It is the same answer Longfellow gives when he writes:

**Though the mills of God grind slowly;
Yet they grind exceeding small;
Though with patience He stands waiting,
With exactness grinds He all.**

In other word, a time of reckoning is coming, but coming on God's timetable, not ours.

God does have a plan, and that plan is being worked out, even when we don't see it.

In today's reading, God reveals His plan to the boy Samuel. Samuel, in turn, delivers it to Eli. What is it?

It is this: Wicked Hophni and Phinehas are going to be cut off. Indeed, Eli's whole line of descent is going to perish from the earth. As a result, all Israel will know that there is a God in heaven.

The fate of these religious leaders of old time stand as a warning to those of us who minister at God's altar today. God is not mocked. A day of reckoning is coming for those who trifle with sacred things, those who feed the

sheep with something other than the Word of the Lord.

But there is more.

God has a bigger plan, and it involves Samuel. He will lead the nation.

The boy Samuel hears the word of the Lord that night in the Tabernacle and responds with:
“Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.”

But that is not the only time he will hear and respond to the God’s call.

Verse 21 of chapter 3 says:

“And the LORD appeared again in Shiloh: for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD.”

The chapter begins in darkness. The word of the Lord was precious or scarce in those days. Revelation seems to have ceased.

But it ends in a burst of light. God is again speaking, and Samuel is His chosen agent.

He will judge Israel, not Hophni and Phinehas.

But more significantly, still, at the end of his life, he will anoint King David, from whose line will come a Saviour. We know that saviour's name – Jesus.

My message to you this morning is that God stays on the job in the worst of times. He is at work right now. Be encouraged.

Perhaps you are going through a hard time in your own life right now.

Where is God? At work. Perhaps unseen, but on the job bringing about his purposes of good.

What should be your response? Trust and obey. Be a Samuel and say: “Speak, Lord, thy servant heareth.”

Perhaps you are pessimistic about the state of the world. Wars and rumours of war, injustice, violence and discord on the streets in our land, have gotten you down.

Where is God? On the job. Trust and obey. Say with Samuel, “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.”