

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Philippians 1:2-11

Rev. Irene Pak Lee, preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen, January 14, 2024

## **Let Your Light Shine**

Well, Stone Church of Willow Glen, here I am. It's my last Sunday with you in worship together after almost 11.5 years of ministry alongside you. I had just turned 32 years old when I started here as your associate pastor. I know, I know, I still look 32 years old as you're all doing the math in your head about how old I am now. I had to leave my first church under similar circumstances and wasn't sure what was next. I was ready to move back home with my parents and I know all of you parents LOVE the idea of your 30-something year old child moving back home with you, right? By God's grace, providence, or movement, Ken Henry reached out to me a few months before my time was ended and we had coffee and he started telling me about the associate position that was being opened here at Stone and wondered if I might be willing to consider coming here.

I then met with the Session and I will always remember at one point Fred Oliver saying to me, "Irene, we love justice and we love Jesus" and I was sold.

I was still learning how to be a pastor. I didn't know everything then and let's be clear, I still don't know everything now...but here we are, 11 years later. All week I was wondering to myself, "How do you say goodbye in a few minutes? What do you preach in a last sermon to a congregation you have loved dearly for so long?"

My clergy colleagues have varying opinions on this. I heard one person tell me, "Irene, you say all the things you've been too nervous and too scared to say-you just drop truth bombs and then run away." Okay, that's definitely one idea. But there's still a party later this afternoon that I have to show up to and I don't want you to hate me. Another colleague said, "You just stand up there and cry and wax poetic together and the goal is to make everybody cry." I know Kathleen is already crying over there so I'm probably off to a good start-but I really don't want your final memory of me as standing up here wiping snot from my face and blubbering

through something incomprehensible for 10 minutes. Plus, we record everything now and can you imagine someone finding that sermon years later?

Then I heard from a trusted colleague, “Irene, you offer them Christ and the love of God, the same way you have all along, because you remember that God was present with them long before you and you know that God will be present with them long after you.”

And so friends, I decided to go that route-to proclaim the Word of God to you as I always do when I stand behind this pulpit-and offer you Christ and the love of God, because of course that’s what I want to say to you, again and again and even for a final time.

And so our second reading comes from 1 Samuel 3:

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; <sup>3</sup>the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. <sup>4</sup>Then the LORD called, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ and he said, ‘Here I am!’ <sup>5</sup>and ran to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call; lie down again.’ So he went and lay down. <sup>6</sup>The LORD called again, ‘Samuel!’ Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call, my son; lie down again.’ <sup>7</sup>Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. <sup>8</sup>The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy.<sup>9</sup>Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’ This is the Word of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray: O God, you have searched us and you know us. You hem us in behind and before, and nothing is out of your reach or understanding. As we come again before your Word, grant us understanding in heart, mind and spirit, and remind us of your faithfulness

in all things. And always, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The Word of the Lord was rare in those days. Visions were not widespread. With that one verse, it feels as though the context of this story is dropped right into ours, doesn't it? The context for a young Samuel in the temple is set before us. This whole narrative is such a great story for so many reasons. It includes all the things we like in a story, some mystery, excitement, wonder, suspense and the a-ha moment. What's going to happen next?

What we know is that the Word of the Lord was rare-visions were hard to come by. The people were living through times where it was hard to see how God was loving and at work, even in the temple space where God was said to abide. The wider context to this story is that everyone was corrupt, yes, even those in the temple. Eli's sons who had oversight of the temple had been blaspheming God and doing all kinds of nonsense. God had seemed to go quiet while injustices swirled all around the community. In the midst of all of that, there is this child, Samuel, who has been brought up in the temple as promised by his mother Hannah. He has been ministering under Eli.

So here's this context of the temple where things are still happening as they always do, but something feels a little bit off. Some things are not quite right. In the midst of that, there is this beautiful call story of a young boy. But before we get to that part, can I tell you the part that struck me this week and wouldn't let me go?

The beginning of verse 3 reads: the lamp of God had not yet gone out. The lamp of God had not yet gone out. It's this short phrase at the beginning of a sentence, but I was clinging to those words this week. Because, yes, before we even get to the call story of Samuel, we FEEL the reality of the corruption, injustice and pain in this world-or at least I definitely do. There is so much unending death, war, problems of the world that seem insurmountable...that's on top of the strain and hardship of your individual lives and those you love-that damn cancer, the caregiving you do for someone you love but don't know anymore, the wrestling with your mental health, the grief of love lost. But friends, in the midst of all of the hard, even in the

midst of corruption and overwhelming pain of the world and our lives, **the lamp of God has not yet gone out.**

It might seem ridiculous for me to cling to a spark, a small flame in the midst of suffocating darkness, but do you know how much light a spark can produce when it's really dark? In fact, the darker it is, the more you can see it. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, friends. And so that's the word I want to remind you of today-the lamp of God has not yet gone out.

With that word, the call of Samuel begins. The back and forth and movement of the story happens next. And what I love about it is that Samuel has no idea that God is calling him. In fact, scripture tells us this odd thing in the midst of his call story that Samuel did not yet actually know the Lord-God had not revealed Godself to him yet. This boy has been working and serving in the temple pretty much his whole life, and yet he did not yet know God and so of course, when he hears a voice calling to him, he thinks it's his mentor, Eli.

You know, I don't know how tired Samuel was working in that temple, but let's just say that what he was doing probably violates all of our child labor laws. He was likely exhausted-and for anyone, exhaustion can dull our hearts, minds and souls... when we are exhausted, it is so hard to listen for the voice of God, let alone recognize it.

But the lamp of God had not yet gone out.

And so, friends, what I want you to take with you today, what I pray for you and hope for you in the midst of what might feel like an unexpected transition and all the despair in the world is to LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE. Because even today, even in the midst of all that's going on in the world and in our lives, I *refuse* to give into a narrative of despair. The love of God is real, it surrounds us, and we are the ones who are called to shine, even if all we have is a spark. The lamp of God has not yet gone out.

Today is my last official Sunday, and I know after I leave things are going to be different. Change is hard no matter what kind it is. But friends, God is still calling

Stone Church-and I know a lot of you are exhausted and worried and it's probably difficult to listen for God's voice in the midst of that fatigue. Some of you might be stuck in a routine of service that has not let you pause to listen for how God's voice is speaking to you. But the lamp of God has not yet gone out.

One of the things I know after serving here, after visiting with so many of you in your homes or in hospitals, with those come and gone, is that every time, *every* time, *I* have been blessed with what I call your heart light. I feel it and I see it every time I sit with you whether in pastoral care or learning your stories through the Seniors in Transition group, through the Youth Group, PW, listening to the choir, and the list goes on. I know this might make me sound a little woo woo, but I feel your light shining out of you. You have light and collectively, it shines, Church. The lamp of God has not yet gone out.

I know we've been through a lot of change, transitions, a pandemic, and now another shift with my departure, but what I hope most for you is that you don't give up on the justice, love, and mercy that this place offers to a hurting and aching world. You have a unique voice that needs to continue to be loud and proud in the Christian community. A voice of welcome, justice, and acting like the kingdom of God is here on earth as it is in heaven. Light can hurt when it comes up and on after a period of darkness but please don't hide it. If your heart is breaking, I pray it will break open to the world and not grow hard and cold. Be sad if you need to be sad, but please don't grow numb. God is still calling you in the night. Will you respond "Here I am?" Will you pause and listen and say "Speak Lord?" Because, the lamp of God has not yet gone out in this place.

Friends, even if we don't understand God's voice calling to us, the amazing news is that God will call again and again. God calls Samuel again and again. God calls until Samuel learns how to listen. God does not give up on us. And so friends, let your light shine.

I swear I'm going to stop talking soon... I didn't know when it would happen, but the passage from Philippians 1 that Nicholas read is the one I always wanted to read to you if I ever left this place because I know I will be thanking God every

time I remember you and I am SO grateful for the ministry we've been a part of together for a little over a decade.

I've heard so many of your stories and I've been privileged to be part of your lives, holding hands and saying final prayers as folks have taken their last breath, marking ashes on babies and 100 year olds, baptizing infants, children, youth and adults and getting the privilege to seeing so many of those babies grow up. To break bread with you and share the cup as a tangible reminder of God with us. The lamp of God has not yet gone out.

Thank you for welcoming me into those holy spaces to witness the ways in which Christ has changed you-to serve alongside you, I have been so privileged to be your pastor. Thank you for sticking with me with my wild ideas, especially for those moments where you thought "she's lost it now." I have been loved by you in ways I never expected through bridal showers and baby showers and I have a feeling the party later is going to be epic. My soul has sung in this place in ways that I always I hoped that it would and ways in which I could never have imagined. I am proud of the ways that we have fed the hungry together, clothed those in need, visited the sick, learned new ways of doing ministry through Zoom and remain connected through a pandemic-I am proud that we learned how to say black lives matter and develop interfaith relationships. I am so proud of the young people in this place-you all, get to know them-they are amazing, compassionate and kind and have so much to teach us. I am proud to say that one time, I presided a Halloween-themed wedding for a deaf lesbian couple, Fran and Julia-not many pastors have *that* on their resume. The lamp of God has not yet gone out.

What I know is that all parts of our story together have been so important, not only the parts we are proud of, but also in the searching, healing, hurting and reconciliation. More than anything, I hope you know you have been loved by me and you have changed me and helped me become the pastor I am today.

And sisters and brothers and siblings in Christ, although our chapter together is coming to an end, the story will continue to be told because you are still telling it. Because the truth is, this ending is a new beginning as well. It is worth remembering that the call from God to walk into an unknown future is still a future

in which Jesus loves and guides us forward-even if it means pulling up our roots and resettling all together.

The lamp of God has not yet gone out. It has not yet gone out. It has shined before us and it will continue to shine after us. You bear that light. So friends, let your light shine. I promise I will too.

Amen.

### **BENEDICTION**

<sup>3</sup> I thank my God every time I remember you, <sup>4</sup>constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, <sup>5</sup>because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup>I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup>It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. <sup>8</sup>For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. <sup>9</sup>And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight <sup>10</sup>to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, <sup>11</sup>having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ  
The love of God  
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always  
Until we meet again

Amen.