

# Mush in the Desert

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Pastor Bill Mosley

A man is lost in the desert. He used up the last of his water three days ago and he's lying, gasping, on the sand, when in the distance he suddenly hears a voice calling, "Mush! Mush!"

Not trusting his ears he turns his head & there it is again, closer this time: "Mush! Mush!"

Propping himself up on one elbow he squints against the sun and sees, of all things, an Eskimo in a fur coat driving a sled with a team of huskies across the dunes. Thinking that he's hallucinating, he blinks & shakes his head, but it's for real! He painfully lifts one arm & in a cracked voice calls, "He-elp!"

The Eskimo pulls the sled up, the huskies panting in the heat, & the lost man croaks to the Eskimo, "I don't know what you're doing here, or why, but thank God you are! I've been wandering around this desert for days, my water's all gone & I'm completely lost!"

The perspiring Eskimo looks down at him and says, "You think YOU'RE lost!"

Well, that's a picture of the Christian faith. We don't have all the answers, we even admit that we are lost, without Jesus. But with Jesus, we know where the water is, and we can tell others about it. Martin Luther said, "The Christian faith is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

You could say that was one of the roles of Moses when leading the children of Israel through the Wilderness to the Promised Land. After Moses, God gave the people other leaders. Joshua, the general, then a series of local leaders called judges, the likes of Samson, Gideon, & Deborah. These were men and women who were respected and trusted, and had the favor of God.

One of the last of these is Eli, who expected his sons to also be judges & prophets, but they were not worthy.

Instead, God sends Eli the boy Samuel, who is the last of the Judges and will anoint the first kings of Israel, Saul and David.

Samuel was the last judge of Israel, the priest & prophet who "anointed," we would say "inaugurated" Kings Saul & David. Like Elizabeth & Sarah, Hannah was given a child as an answer to prayer. She responded to the gift of promise by giving her son to Eli the priest. Samuel was to answer the call of God to pronounce judgment on Eli's corrupt sons. The call of God will not be denied.

Poet Theodore Roethke (RET-kah) said "In a dark time, the eye begins to see." Eli is not sightless, but he is blind to some things. He serves as a characterization of the times. "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread," the Bible tells us. The darkness of this late-night story shows a lack of spiritual vision and the failure of even the sons of Eli to be God's people.

Yet it is precisely in the middle of this dark & unhappy setting that a new word is heard, God speaks again, & a young boy – himself the offspring of what had been Hannah's despairing barrenness - listens.

God is still speaking! But are we listening? Are we open to hearing a new word of truth amid doubt & obscurity, when we're not sure which way to go? We're open to being moved by God in the presence of love & beauty & all we consider blessing. But what about when in our own lives, our own church, or the world around us, we find little that speaks of God? Are we still listening then?

When we are lost in the desert can we find an Eskimo to join us in our lostness, and help us find water?

The old priest Eli represented what was passing away. But without his support Samuel would not have listened, or would not have heard the word of God that came to him... in the middle of the night. The old, established, & traditional can lead us in the new & different world in which we find ourselves.

God still speaks to us. Can we listen at times when it seems most unlikely that anything good could happen? Can we understand that "blessing" is more than beautiful sunsets & happy moments? In our own experience, can we say the "lamp of God" still burns when the lights are out?

After buying her kids a pet hamster, after they PROMISED they would take care of it, Mom, as usual, ended up with the responsibility.

One evening, exasperated, she asked them, "How many times do you think that hamster would have died if I hadn't looked after it?"

After a moment, her youngest son replied quizzically, "Once?"

This seems such a beautiful parable for the situation of the church today: in so many ways the church as we have known it appears to be on the way out, declining attendance, lack of support for traditional activities, ageing of the faithful, etc. etc. -- yet, like Eli, it is this dying institution that will nurture & coach the next generation of vision-catchers, even if they lead in totally different directions. I often feel like an Eli -- dubiously successful guardian of something that's on its way out, seemingly unable to bridge the gap myself to a future whose

outlines are unclear....

yet still believing in the importance of this dying institution, if only to guard the spark a little while longer & somehow be there to pass it on to others who will actually be able to do something with it..... I hope...

The man in the desert and the Eskimo had this in common: they both admitted they were lost. But they were talking to each other. They were beggars discussing where to find bread. That's what we need to do today. Talk about where we've found bread. Give a witness.

Witnessing seems an ominous task to Lutheran folk -- like being asked to provide proof for something. Actually, it's just telling stories about the difference God makes in our lives. Witnessing is a key concept for John's Gospel. He uses the word frequently. In today's reading, we have a prime example of what witnessing means: pointing out places where Jesus is present, explaining what makes Jesus special -- John used "Lamb of God," Peter later refers to Jesus as Messiah. When they met him, they recognized him as special and worth telling others about. When we witness, we invite people to join us in learning more about God and in worshiping this one who changes our lives. We talk about how being with other believers helps and supports us; we share hospitality and tell others, "My faith fills me and helps me get through the days -- good and bad, alike. Come and see for yourself what you think."

Yes, God still speaks to us today. And he means for us to answer, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

It's how we know we are not lost. And sharing what we hear is how we renew our lives, the lives of others, and the church.

Lord, speak to us for we are listening, & saying no to whatever makes it more difficult to say yes to you. 1229 words