

Where Wisdom Also Can Be Found – 1 Samuel 3:1-20

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At age seven, a young boy named Danny Trejo participated in his first drug deal. He was first arrested at the age of 10 and experienced his first incarceration at Eastlake Juvenile Hall in California. That was in 1956.

Throughout the 1960s, Trejo's life consisted predominantly of intermittent jail stints in the California prison system. After his release from prison, he did odd jobs and later became a drug counselor, since he himself had battled addiction.

Late one night in the early 1980s, he received a call from a teenaged patient, asking for his assistance in dealing with cocaine problems on the set of the movie *Runaway Train*.

While on the set of the film, Trejo was offered a job as an extra in the film's prison scenes. Edward Bunker, a former convict turned published crime author who was writing the screenplay for the film, recognized Trejo from their time together as inmates at San Quentin Prison. Remembering Trejo's boxing skills, Bunker played a pivotal role in securing Trejo as one of the actor's personal trainer and boxing advisor.

Bunker also convinced the film's director to offer Trejo a small acting role in the movie, asserting that Trejo's personal experiences of incarceration would provide authenticity to the prison drama.

Since that breakthrough moment in the mid-1980s, Danny Trejo, who just turned 80, has been in over 70 movies. You'd probably recognize him if you saw his face from the many action roles he's had. He also has gone on to open a series of successful restaurants in Los Angeles and in other parts of the country—Trejo's Tacos is the name of the franchise. He's done voiceover work for movies and TV, appeared in video games, and even published his own memoir.

When Danny Trejo got out of prison in the 1970s, what did he think his future was? And what did the world around him think of him? Surely as an ex-con, his opportunities for success would've had to have been limited—if he had any opportunities at all.

And yet, Danny Trejo started working and put himself in a position for somebody to notice his talent and skill. He still had something positive to contribute to his world despite his checkered past.

It seems Trejo's path has been somewhat similar to that of one of our characters in this story from 1st Samuel.

In this text today, the Scripture tells us, "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread" (v. 1). That's the author's way of letting us know things weren't going all that well among Israel's religious leadership. It was a time of serious decline.

The high priest, Eli, was a big reason for that decline. He was out of touch, just going through the motions. His two sons were really bad news as well. Both followed their old man into the family business of priesthood, but they hardly took their vocation seriously.

While it's maybe unfair to saddle poor old, negligent Eli with the blame for his sons' corruption, remember what sort of society this was. In patriarchal Israel, family relationships were everything. The Lord of the Hebrew Scriptures called people not so much as individuals, but as entire family units. If Eli's bloodline had grown so degenerate as this, the Lord would look elsewhere, outside his family, to find a faithful new leader.

The Lord, as it happened, had already begun the process of changing the guard. The boy Samuel was waiting in the wings, ready to take over spiritual leadership from Eli. He just didn't know it yet.

In today's passage, the Lord started speaking to Samuel. The only problem is that Samuel didn't have the experience yet to know who it was. He heard that voice calling in the night and naturally assumed it was Eli. So, Samuel went and woke up the old man, saying, "Here I am, you called me."

"It wasn't me," said Eli. "Go back to sleep."

This happened a second time with much the same result. The third time Samuel intruded on his sleep, Eli realized there's more going on than a young boy's vivid dreams. Eli, the one guilty of negligent leadership, said, "Pay attention, now. The next time this happens, here's what you do: Sit up straight and say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" Turned

out, Eli hadn't forgotten completely what it's like to receive a word from the Lord.

The next time the Lord spoke, Samuel was ready and responded, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

This time, the Lord said more than just Samuel's name. God delivered a message of woe for Eli and his sons. "I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them."

Can you imagine how that must have sounded to young Samuel? It's his very first vision, and it's a curse — a forever curse directed at the old man who has been so kind to him. It's no wonder that, when Eli asked him what he had heard, Samuel was afraid to share it.

Eli persisted. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Just tell me." Eli already knew what the message was. He knew, deep down, how thoroughly he failed to live as God's representative.

Samuel had no stomach for it, but he delivered the Lord's message anyway. Eli accepted the news. He didn't punish Samuel. What would be the point? The boy was just the messenger. The judgment came from God.

Most of the time you hear this story preached or taught, the accent is all on young Samuel and how the Lord reaches out to him, the chosen one. But if you look further back in the text — as we've just done — you come to see how the story is at least as much about Eli, the fallen priest. Eli is a deeply flawed man, but he's also profoundly wise. His last act of faithfulness before his dimly burning wick sputters out is to train the young boy, Samuel, in the art of spiritual discernment.

Eli gets a lot of bad press — for some very good reasons — but he really does deserve a break. He may be ineffectual, but his heart is in the right place.

Eli is an example for all of us who have lived a while and accumulated our share of failures and regrets. We know we're far from perfect. But like Danny Trejo, we haven't given up yet. We still have a gift to impart to the next generation.

Sometimes, we give up too early on people after they've made their mistakes. The Eli's of the world, the Danny Trejos. People who've screwed

up but along the way still have wisdom and knowledge that will benefit a newer generation.

One mistake, or a series of mistakes in an earlier part of one's life, does not make up the totality of a person. The missteps we make do not negate the gifts we have that can still bring good to the lives of others.

One of the developments over the last several years has been something called Cancel Culture. It's the notion that people who do or say things the culture deems offensive must be shut down or "cancelled." This is most notable with celebrities. Matt Lauer, the host of the Today Show, did bad things with women and had to go away. Same with the journalist Charlie Rose and Bill O'Reilly of Fox News. Lauer and Rose have totally vanished from the public eye, while O'Reilly has regained a media presence in a different and more independent setting.

They needed to be held accountable for their actions, but their mistakes did not erase all the skills and experience they had in their chosen fields. Since their exiles, it wouldn't be surprising if their wisdom has been shared behind the scenes with young journalists who crave tips and insights to foster their own careers.

While their public presence was cancelled, the talents and skills of these celebrities were not. They could still be put to good use for the betterment of others.

Eli was not a good high priest; and yet, he mentored Samuel in a way that helped Samuel recognize the voice of God in his life. Could there be anything more valuable than that?

We all make wrong turns at times. Sometimes those turns are more severe and lead to more damage than others. But one mistake or a series of them should not define us forever. Until our lives end, we have gifts that can be shared. Samuel found a flawed mentor in Eli who turned him on to the voice of God. And we can be that person to somebody else even when we tell ourselves (or somebody else tells us) that we're not worthy.

Christ redeems us—warts and all. And as part of gratitude for that redemption, let us all share wisdom gained from our own experiences to help others find success and find greater faith in their own journeys with the Lord.