

The story of Samuel's early life takes place when Judges ruled Israel about 3000 years ago. Once the Israelites entered the promise land and settled down they had to find a home for the Ark of the Covenant, and the place that was chosen was Shiloh. The Israelites had chosen a group of people who were tasked with keeping the Ark safe, with their lives if need be. They also had to manage all the people who came to see the Ark. They were coming to see God for the Law was from God, and the giving of the law meant that God was with the people. They came to pray, and to make sacrifice. Some came because they wanted to do God's will. Some came because they wanted God to do their will.

When Samuel was finally born, he was sent as a young boy to Shiloh to be God's servant, and learn the job of priest from Eli. That's where our story today begins. But there's more to the story than the portion we hear today. It begins on page _____ of your pew Bible.

Eli's sons were there at Shiloh too, and they were being groomed to take over from the aging Eli, but the story tells us that Eli's sons were wicked. They were corrupt and so weren't fit to inherit the job from their father.

1 Samuel 2:22-23 ²² Now Eli was very old. He heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. ²³ He said to them, "Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people.

And then we get to the part of the story that was read this morning. What is then missing at the end of the story is that God tells Samuel a message to take to Eli and Samuel, the new kid on the block is not keen to bite the hand that feeds him.

1 Samuel 3:11-13 ¹¹ Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. ¹² On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³ For I have told him that 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.

In other words, there was nothing Eli could do about this. He was not able to make his sons behave. In the morning, Samuel did what God said, and he went to see Eli. He still wasn't not

sure what he should say, but Eli himself helped him out. You see, the lamp of God had **not** yet gone out...it was just pretty dim. So Eli said to Samuel

1 Samuel 3:17-19 ¹⁷ "What was it that [the Lord] told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." ¹⁸ So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then [Eli] said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him." ¹⁹ As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

You see, there was a lot more to this story than we heard read from the lectern. Poor Eli. You can imagine that earlier in his career with his sons as little boys he must have thought that life was great. He had sons to pass on this ministry to and they would be set for life. He thought he knew God's plan. And then his sons blew it. They clearly weren't cut out for the business that their father had groomed them for. They were such a disappointment. And Eli couldn't do a thing to change that.

Sometimes there are people and situations over which we are powerless. And that brings me to the beginning of a new series for this Epiphany season. Always using our scripture as a guide, I'm going to tell you a little bit about the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous over the next few weeks...we'll fit in all 12 steps in the course of 6 weeks. After all, the founders of AA, were Episcopalians themselves. They attended the church's Oxford Group together at first. AA began in 1935 in Akron, Ohio as the outcome of a meeting between a well-known surgeon, Dr. Bob Smith and a New York broker, Bill Wilson.

The steps are used now by many anonymous groups. They are not a "self-help" program, as some people might think. You cannot work the steps by yourself, you need to be supported by people in a group, working on the same, or similar problems, and you need to understand that AA, Alanon, NA, CODA, OA, or ACOA and all of these programs are spiritual programs. Not everyone attends a church, or synagogue, or House of Prayer, but all must come to believe in a higher power of some sort.

The first step: Admitted that we were powerless over (whatever). That our lives had become unmanageable.

It takes a lot to give up. It takes all the bravery and humility you can muster to say "Uncle". I cannot try to control this any longer by myself. Our addiction may be to a food or chemical,

but it also can be to a person, a job, or anything that threatens to rule our lives, and destroy us in the process.

It is commonly thought that people who can't stop drinking, or drugging lack will-power. But I am here to tell you that some of us find that no amount of self-will can win out over our addiction. And we certainly cannot do it by ourselves. Without God it is too much for us. Self-confidence, if we have any, will not do us any good, either. In fact it is a total liability. Step One has two parts. First we have to come to understand that we are powerless. But then, it is a separate matter to finally admit that our lives have become unmanageable because of our addiction. I may have decided that I can't stop drinking. But I may continue to feel that I can control it enough to manage my life, and my addiction. We have to admit complete defeat in order to begin to develop enough humility to ask for help, and to begin the process of healing.

Step Two: Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. For some people, acknowledging that there is a power greater than themselves is a challenge in itself. It's safe to say that all of us here would not have trouble with this step. Some in recovery have chosen their AA group to be their higher power if they have a problem with the "God thing".

Step Three: Made a decision to turn our lives and our will over to the care of God as we understood him. Although this may also seem like a slam dunk for Christians in general, and you and I in this church in particular, we must admit that we don't ALWAYS consult God when making a decision. We don't always do what is best for us...make the right decision in every case.

We have a wonderful examples of people doing God's will this morning: Hannah, in turning her son over to God, Samuel, in listening to God and doing what was asked, even Eli in telling Samuel to give it to him straight. And, in our Gospel reading this morning. Jesus said to Philip, "Follow me" and Philip not only does so, he runs to get his friend. Nathanael, by the way, is also known as Bartholomew, in case you were wondering why we never see Nathanael in lists of the disciples. Jesus assures both the fellows that by following him they will see greater things than these. And indeed, those who make the decision to turn their lives and their wills over to the care of God, do indeed end up seeing and doing greater things than they could do on their own unaided will.

Steps 1, 2 and 3 are the basis of the AA, and other anonymous programs, and are often commonly known by this shorthand: Step 1: came, Step 2: came to, and Step 3: came to believe. Huh, maybe these steps might be a good thing for people to follow, even if not crippled by addiction.