

Millennials Are(n't) Killing Christianity



Last week, we talked about The Problem. How Millennials are not coming back to church as we might expect them to. And how we really ought to do something about that.

Let's get this out of the way: That last thing we should try to do is make church "cool." If all we do is install an espresso maker in the narthex and replace the organ with guitar amplifiers, we will end up offering the same old thing but with a shinier packaging. We should not "guess" what Millennials and other younger generations will want in church. We will guess wrong. We're not that cool.

When I think of what we *should* be doing, I think of one of the most underrated heroes of the Bible: Eli the priest.

If it were not for Eli, the history of the Bible would have been much different. Eli was a high priest at a time when, as the story says, "the word of the Lord was

rare... Visions were not widespread.” I read that and think it’s an eerily familiar description of our own time.

Eli was the mentor of a boy named Samuel. No one knew it yet, but Samuel was going to usher Israel into a whole new era of history. He would anoint Israel’s first and second kings. He would be God’s prophet during a time considered the highest point of Israel’s history. He would transition the nation from a period of relative disarray, to a time of centralized authority. He would have two books of the Bible named after him.

But in Eli’s day, Samuel was just a kid training to be a priest. A pretty annoying kid, in fact. One night, Samuel wakes Eli up, saying, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ Eli says, *No I didn’t — I’m asleep, you annoying kid.* And Samuel goes back to bed. A minute later, Samuel comes back, saying, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ Eli, wondering what kind of prank this weird kid is pulling on him, says, *Go back to bed.*

Sure enough, a minute later, here’s Samuel saying, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But this time, Eli realizes he might be in a Bible story. He tells Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if [God] calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”’ In other words, Samuel is having a spiritual experience, and Eli uses his knowledge and expertise to help Samuel recognize the divine message he’s receiving.

So Samuel accepts Eli’s guidance. And God speaks to him! Holy cow! Here we are in a time when the word of the Lord was rare, and we have God actually speaking out loud!

‘See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house for ever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them.’

Yikes. Not good for Eli.

But it was true — his sons were awful. They used their social position as priests to steal food and sexually assault women. And Eli wouldn’t confront them about it.

So the next day, Eli wants to know what God has told Samuel. He says, ‘What was it that God told you? Do not hide it from me.’ Talk about an awkward moment for Samuel. The message God gave him is like 90% bad news for Eli. Imagine how he must feel having to relate that news to his mentor, who helped him recognize the message. But he does.

And Eli says, *Look, ya dumb kid, you must’ve misheard. I’m the high priest and I have been for decades. God’s not going to tell something like that to you.*

No. Eli says, ‘It is the Lord; let God do what seems good to God.’ Obviously, Eli is not overjoyed to hear what Samuel has to say. But look at the way he accepts it. He doesn’t doubt Samuel in the least. He essentially says, *It looks like this is what God is doing. I’m going to have to recede into the background while this kid takes a step into the spotlight.*

It was not altogether news to Eli when Samuel warned him what was to come. He knew about the trouble his sons were making and was told he should've done something about it.

In the same way, we know the situation around religion these days is not great. And if we have any doubts, [there's data to back it up](#). The amount of people who say religion is important in their life has been steadily dropping for at least twenty years. Only a third of all people can say they attended a religious service over the last week. Well over a third of people (37%) believe religion is old fashioned or out of date.

It's tempting to put the blame on others and say there's something wrong with the new generations and that's why they're not taking religion seriously. But I think we know the truth. If religion was worthwhile, people wouldn't be leaving it. We have failed to make the case that church is a vital part of life.

To make the case to a generation that has largely left church, we need something new and authentic. Something we haven't tried already. In the words of the story, "something that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." Something that can only come from God.

And how will God show us this new something? Perhaps, like in the story, God will use the new generation to tell us. In that case we'll have to listen.

When I think of what we must do, I think of the Heber Creeper.



The Heber Creeper is a historic train engine outside of Salt Lake City, where I grew up. It's exactly the type of thing a parent can hear about and think, *Oh! Wouldn't that be fun for the whole family!* My mom had this exact thought one weekend when I was about 9, and got tickets for all of us to ride this train. I, however, must have been less than thrilled because I remember bringing a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles comic book.



I *loved* the Ninja Turtles. There was something about those characters and their world that really captured my imagination. So I was on this ancient train, looking over a comic book I'd already read several times, and my mom asked me about it. *What're you reading?*

I launched into the longest monologue ever about the Turtles, their world, and how this issue was bringing them together with all toyetic characters they had fought or teamed up with over the course of the last 12 issues. I monologued the way only a 9 year old boy can about their favorite thing.

About halfway through, I had a realization. It wasn't as dramatic as Samuel's revelation, but I suddenly saw very clearly that my mom didn't really care about the Turtles, but...she was listening to me anyway. I remember thinking, *She doesn't care about this, but she cares about it because I care about it.* It was a pretty heavy thought for a 9 year old.

But I remember feeling so loved in that moment. Here was my mom in the middle of an activity she had planned — hoping to enjoy the beautiful view and the history of this train — and she put that aside to focus on the dumb things I thought were important.

I know there are folks in our church for whom 1st Congregational and its history are the most important things in the world. And they're right to feel that way. This church has a hundred plus year history of bringing God's kingdom to Rhinelander. We've done some truly amazing things in that time. I wasn't here for them, but I've heard the tales!

And yet those things, as amazing and wonderful as they are, are not our future. Christ makes all things new. To make room for those new things, we might have to put a few old things into storage — not to forget them, but to honor them as the way God once used us to bring justice, mercy and spiritual connectedness to Rhinelander.

The future will not be revealed to us, it will be revealed to the new generation. Our role will be to help them realize it, just as Eli helped Samuel realize that the voice he was hearing was God.

Like Eli, when we hear some ear-tingling newness, we must listen. Tingling is not always a pleasant sensation. It's an alarming sensation. Our first instinct might be to run or fight it. Our last instinct might be to stop and say, 'It is the Lord. Let God do what seems good to God.'

But the church is not a thing that lives in the past. The church lives in the present and the future. The church follows the urging of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who led Jesus into a desert and Peter into worshipping with a Roman centurion. The Spirit loves change! The Spirit is dynamic and urges us to be as well. The story of the Bible, the history of the church is a series of earth-shattering changes facilitated by God and the people who were listening.

The good news is that God will see us through this change as well. Our part in it is to listen and make space for it.