

Naughty Priests, Dragon Tattoos, and Jesus Christ
Northminster Presbyterian Church: Ordinary 2, Year B (2012)

The lessons: First Samuel 3¹⁻¹⁰; John 1⁴³⁻¹⁵

If you haven't seen the remake of *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, it's certainly worth a look. The novel from which it was made set the literary world ablaze, and the original Swedish film is fantastic, if hard to take in places. It's the conflict between two ways of life—the established and monied old Swedish guard on the one hand, and the eponymous tattooed girl on the other. The former is generations old, staid, privileged, serious, and circumspect; the latter is chaotic, pierced, loud, fast. Tradition marks the first. Hyperindividualism marks the second. The story marks how one way of life gives way to the other.

Many of us here at Northminster are history buffs and no history is quite as interesting as Germany's. In one stage of Germany's history, she was governed by monarchy, then republic, then communism—did you know Germany was communist for a brief stint?—then Nazism, then the Allied powers. And that was just in the space of one hundred years. No sooner had one governance been established, then another took its place. Germany, for a solid century, was in constant flux.

Indeed, tomorrow's holiday calls to mind a period of turbulence in our own nation's history. The year of our Lord nineteen hundred and sixty eight was a year of tumult: Civil Rights and war and assassinations. One way of life was slipping into the past; another way of life was coming to the fore.

I'm always amazed by the timeliness of Scripture. If I were to describe for you a nation marked by changes in the economy, transitions of power, wars and more prospects of wars, the poor being affected by the actions of the rich, corrupt rulers who appoint one another to positions of power, you might think I was talking about America. Perhaps, but in fact I would be describing the Israel of our first lesson this morning. The times were dark in Israel. The word of the Lord was rare, our lesson says. Silence was taken as judgment. No one knows better what this is like than our teenagers. When a teenager does something stupid, he or she gets reprimanded, and probably a lecture. You know what happens if said teenager does the same stupid thing again. [Insert teen's full name here—loudly and exclamatorily] I can use [teen's] name because she's a darling child who never actually gets in trouble, right? ☺ But what if said teen does that stupid thing yet again? [Fold arms. Glare. Silence.] Nothing undoes a kid like parental silence. It's the description of disapproval. It leaves the child wondering if the parent stills loves him as much as before. The relationship ebbs into the unknown. God was silent toward Israel. Let this be a lesson, Christians: A community can sound religious, look religious, act religious—and still displease a holy and magnificent God.

A large part of the problem was Eli, the chief priest. Eli represented the 'system', the 'establishment', and he had failed to restrain his naughty sons. Enter Samuel, a little boy, borne of a barren woman, which is to say that he is outside the 'system', outside the 'establishment'. He was intended to be Eli's assistant, a sidekick of sorts, like Nixon to Eisenhower or Robin to Batman or Kobe to Shaq. When he hears God call him, he answers "Here I am", but it actually takes a while for Samuel to figure out what is going on. That's often the way it works, Christians. You think you hear a call or feel a tug in a certain direction and you want to give in

to it but you can't quite make out exactly what is going on. The will of the Lord is not always an easy thing to discern and many a saint in Scripture has had to step out first and figure out later.

What Samuel figures out soon enough is that the Word of the Lord isn't always easy news. The Word of the Lord isn't often easy news. Nixon made more news than Eisenhower, Kobe became the face of the Lakers, and Robin eventually got his own comic book. This time, the Word of the Lord means something is coming to an end. The sidekick is taking over. It is the end of the age of priests. It is the beginning of the age of prophets. The age of prophets will end, too, with John the Baptist. It will be replaced by the age of the Messiah, the coming of the Christ. Even the actions of God can seem transitory: On this side of eternity, nothing lasts forever except the mercies of the Lord.

It's hard to remember that. It's hard to let go of the old ways, especially when they've served us so well. It's hard to step into the unknown, precisely because it's unknown. The power struggle between the priests represented by Eli and the prophets represented by Samuel would go on for centuries, even into Christ's time. The old ways die hard. But die they will. An old age is ending. Communications and technology innovate now at the speed of light. The habit of going to a church because it is Methodist or Catholic or Presbyterian or Baptist is being replaced by hurting persons looking for a congregation who cares. Politicians are being exposed for the crony corporatists they are. Eli is fading away. Samuel is rising up. How then should we respond? Perhaps we should take our cue from Samuel. No matter what tumult we encounter, no matter how the ground shakes and the sky darkens with the changes from one way of the life to the next, may we always trust enough in our God to say, "Lord, here am I." In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.